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RED STAR MAGAZINE 9-27

We Bomb Tokyo!

A Warning To Japan

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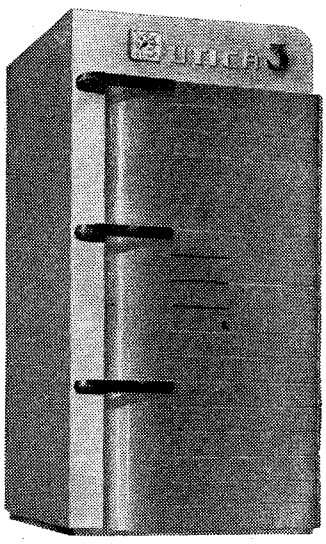

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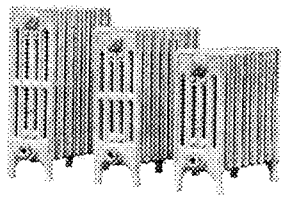

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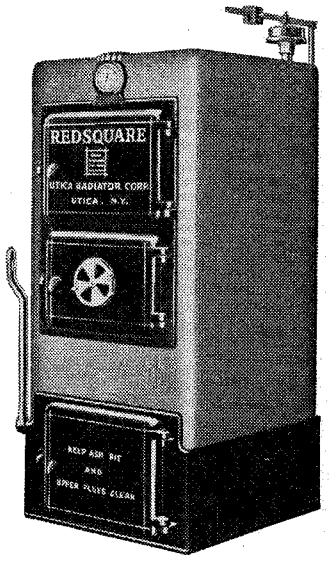

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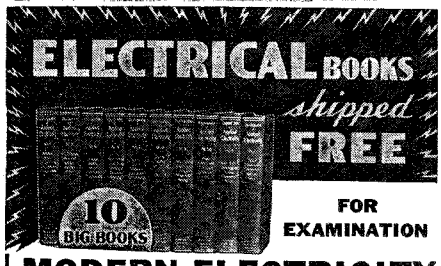

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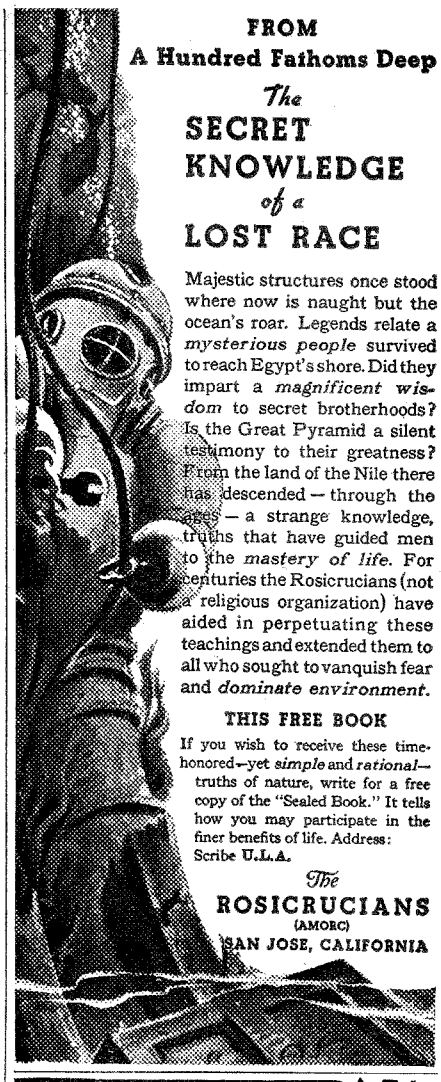

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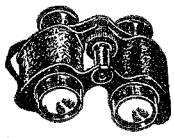

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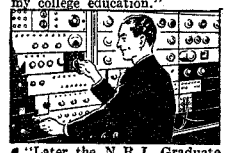

4 "Later the N. R. I. Graduate Service Department sent me to Station KWCR as a Radio Operator. Now I am Radio Engineer of Station WSUI and connected with Television Station W9XK."

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ARGOSY

America's Oldest and Best All-Fiction Magazine

Volume 311 — CONTENTS FOR SEPTEMBER 27, 1941 — Number 1

Looking Ahead!

SEVEN MILE HOUSE

That trail began in a deserted, burning canyon—a scarlet trail that led to a dead man and then into the dark recesses of nine people's lives. There was no guide for that trail, only a dog's strange growling to give warning of its perils. A magnificent new mystery novel by

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Chalk talks and scrimmages are not enough to win football games—not when there's love and feuding and plain stupidity running wild on the gridiron. Something more than a coach's strategy is needed then—in this case several hundred thousand bucks and some laughter. An absorbing novelet by

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C. K. SHAW

NAZI TERROR OVER NEW YORK

Here is the real, authoritative story of how a great American city may be bombed—and what it will mean to every citizen; by

ROBINSON MacLEAN

Coming in next week's Argosy—October 4

WE BOMB TOKYO!—*Argosy's Blue-Ribbon Feature* ..... **Jay Hamilton** **6**

THE JAPANESE CRISIS: *Listen, America: We have nothing to fear from the "Yellow Peril." And it is time that the fire-eating little brown men take warning; America is tired of insults and incidents and appeasement. We are ready!*

CODE DUELLO—*Short Story* ..... **John Russell** **12**

EARLY AMERICAN: *He was a shaky, tarnished hero; and this was his last stand—absurd, pitiful, and magnificent*

DEAD MEN DON'T FLOAT—*Novelet* .... **Joel Townsley Rogers** **17**

NAVY: *It's not always a matter of guns, torpedoes, or armor plate with Uncle Sam's Navy. Consider Lieutenant-commander Earnshaw, and a brown bottle that won a battle*

MINIONS OF THE SHADOW—*Second of Five Parts* ..... **William Gray Beyer** **26**

FANTASTIC: *Who's that redskin? That's Omega, the cosmic screwball, representing the Indian vote. Watch the paleface politicians bite the dust*

PAPER HERO—*Short Story* ..... **Luke Short** **34**

HUMOR: *When you're tired of writing about barroom brawls, try arranging one. It helps to pay the rent*

GIVE THEM WINGS—*Novelet* ..... **Louis C. Goldsmith** **39**

AIR: *They're fight-whacky, these English; they'll fly the wings off a plane and never count the cost. But they can teach a Yankee instructor things he never knew before*

GOLDEN QUEST—*Short Story* ..... **Hal G. Evarts** **50**

BURMA: *It's a mighty wearing trek from Rangoon to nowhere, in search of a woman from another planet. Let the hunter beware when he finds her!*

COWBOY, RIDE YOUR LUCK—*Conclusion* ..... **Jack Byrne** **55**

WEST: *Today Jim Cardinal operates with a sheath knife on a wounded outlaw; tomorrow he'll use a six-gun to operate on skulduggery*

ARGONOTES **66**

LOOKING AHEAD! **4**

This magazine is on sale every Wednesday

A **RED STAR** *Magazine*

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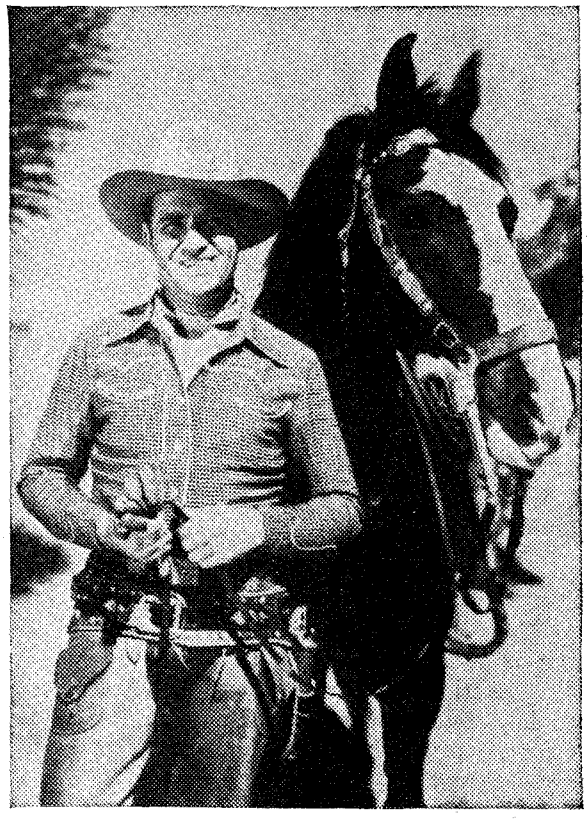

AND CHAMPION

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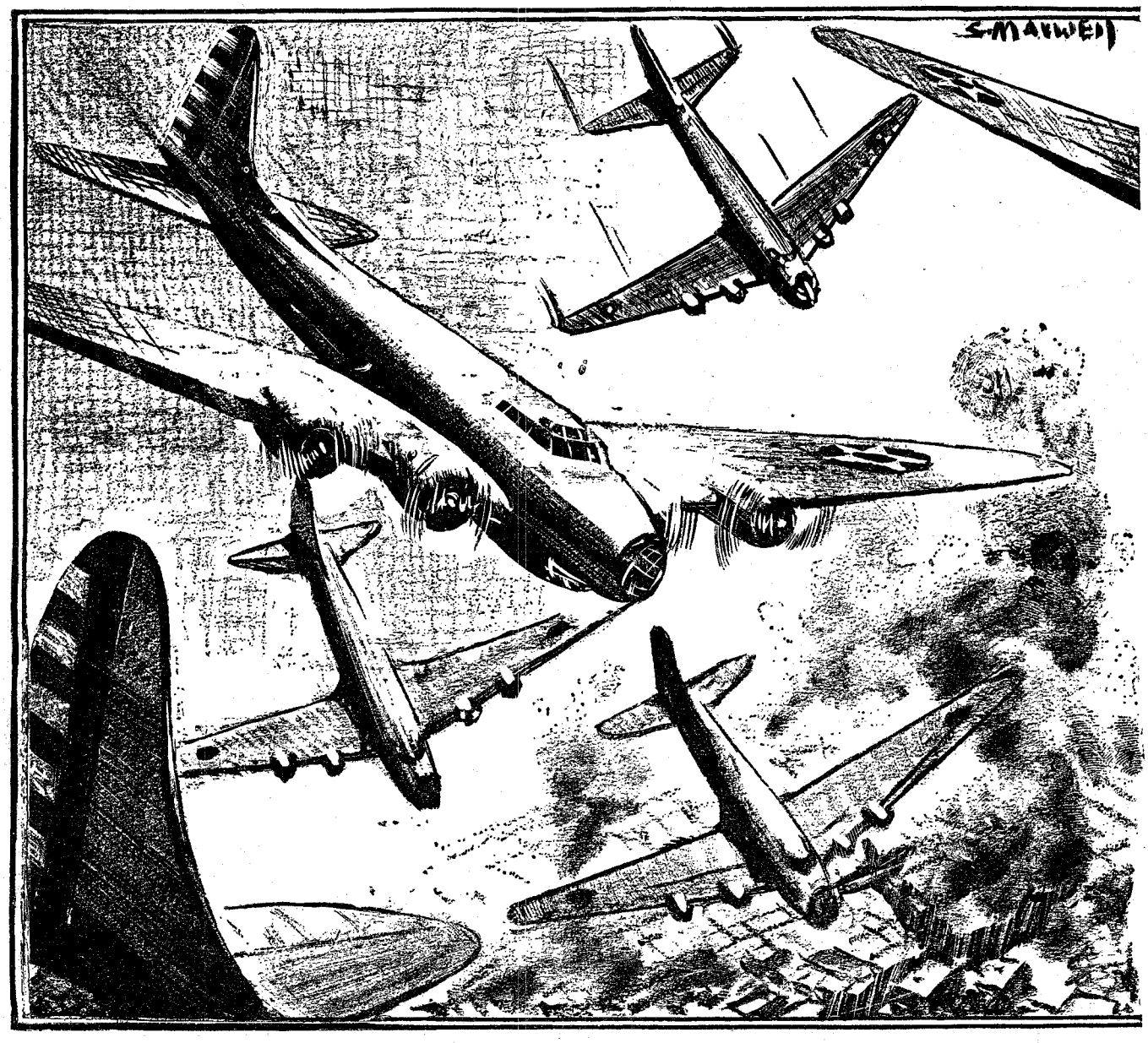
We Bomb



By Jay Hamilton

THE small brown men in blue uniforms top-heavy with braid stood stiffly about the office waiting for the admiral to speak. Their faces too were stiff, inscrutable; but it was as if they all knew exactly what he would say even before he spoke—as if all Tokyo knew it, in fact.

The admiral lifted the radiogram from his desk and adjusted his thick-lensed glasses. There was no need even for the pretense of the glasses, for he could have repeated it word for word without them.

IMPERIAL AIRFORCE TORPEDO PLANE PATROLING SOUTH OF FORMOSA RELEASED TORPEDO AT UNITED STATES DESTROYER 388 WHICH SANK BY THE STERN IN 10 MINUTES. PLANE MACHINE-GUNNED BOATLOAD SURVIVORS AND RETURNED TO BASE.

The admiral placed the radiogram in a wire basket.

"Regrettable accident. . . ."

He shrugged, and the small brown men of Nippon chuckled as at a private joke.

"So sorry," they twittered, and chuckled still louder.

"So very sorry," they mimicked their own stilted, sibilant English. "Just a mistake. Very sorry indeed!"

In Washington the President of the United States was reading a radiogram, slightly different in its wording but similar in content, to his hastily assembled Cabinet. Their faces as they listened were shocked, angry, grave—or utterly unbelieving. The President's voice shook.

The admiral dismissed his conference. This would be just another *Panay* incident—another *Tutuila*—he felt

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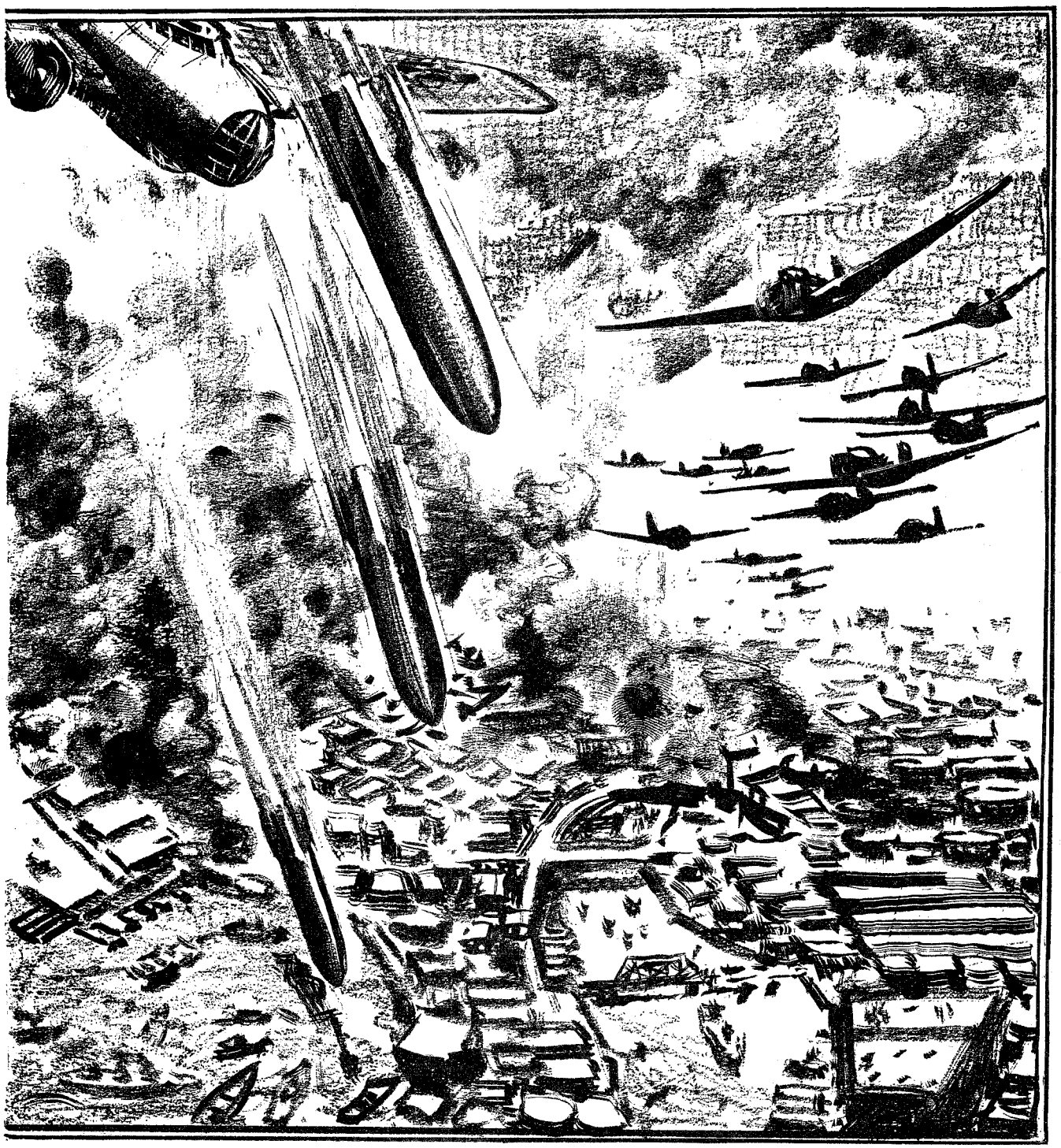
TOKYO!

Who's afraid of the Little Yellow Wolf? Not your Uncle Sammy! Let the war lords of Japan beware: America is through with appeasement. The *Panay* bombed? So sorry! The Embassy damaged? So very sorry! The *Tutuila*? It won't happen again! . . . Well, it had better not; and here are the reasons why

The B-19's roared their answer, and a holocaust spread through flimsy paper houses



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quite sure. A perfunctory, tongue-in-cheek apology on Japan's part which would be promptly rejected by the American State Department. An exchange of notes. Further expressions of regret by Japan, tendered this time with a check to cover property loss, death and injuries.

The two-hour bombing of the U. S. Gunboat *Panay* and three Standard Oil tankers by Japanese planes in 1937 had resulted in the sinking or beaching of all four ships, the death of three Americans and the injury of forty others, and had cost Japan $2,214,007.36 in indemnities. The pilots responsible were "punished," although the exact nature of their "punishment" never was revealed.

Navy Crosses for heroism were awarded by the United States Government to twenty-three of the *Panay's* crew (one posthumously), and the incident was considered closed.

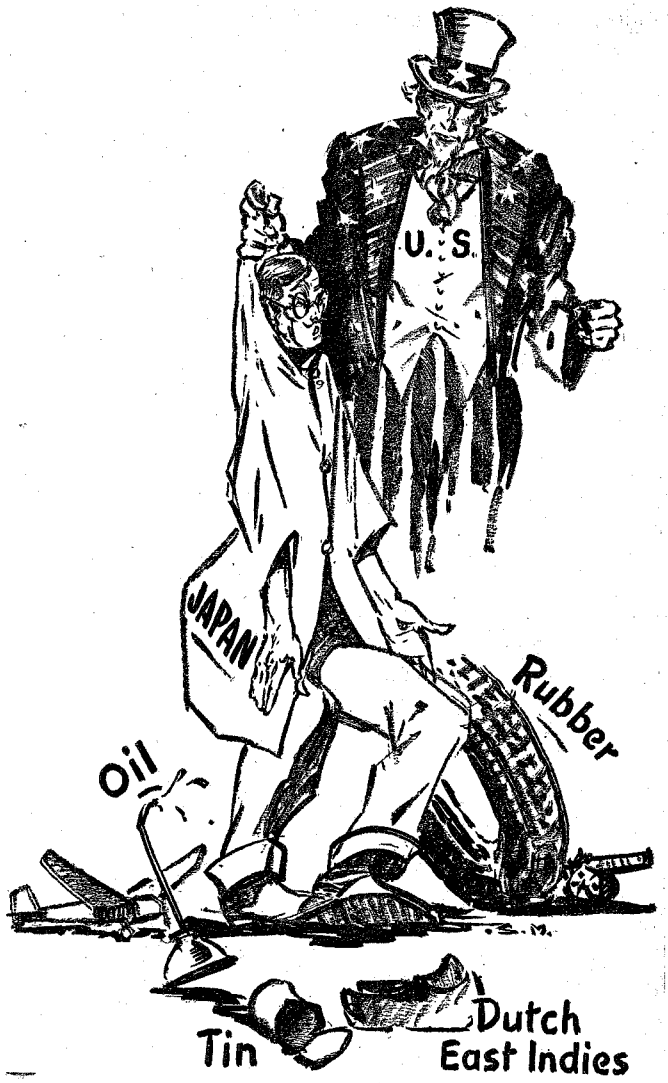
The bombing of the U. S. gunboat *Tutuila,* in late July of 1941, was a less serious affair. The damage had been comparatively small; no lives were lost. Official apologies were made, reparations guaranteed, and safeguards against future incidents "assured"—all this, even before America's State Department had had time to lodge a formal protest.

Everybody relieved; everybody happy. So-o-o—

The admiral settled back in his swivel chair, his expression smug. He knew how these officers had smarted at being balked of their declared intention to sweep southward in a gigantic grab for the Dutch East Indies, British Malaya, Thailand—and Singapore itself: balked by the surprisingly firm attitude of the United States.

He knew how they must be relishing this. For once more Japan had saved face at the expense of the stupid, money-mad Westerners who stubbornly barred her way.

"Regrettable accident," he muttered, and almost grinned. "Very sorry. . . ." *(Once more, Admiral? But listen—)*



NOW! . . . The carefully coded orders from Washington came crackling over the short wave: a terse message to the operations office of the Army Air Field outside Manila; another to the battlewagon flying the flag of the Commander of the Fleet.

Somewhere in the Pacific: somewhere close to the western perimeter of a 2,500-mile battle radius, centering at the great naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, America's Gibraltar of the Pacific.

The fleet cleared for action; ships of the line swung into their assigned battle stations while gaunt destroyers fanned out on their flanks and a swarm of patrol planes hopped off from the decks of the carriers.

Over Manila the short tropical dusk had thickened into night as the first squadron of flying fortresses roared down the runway and lifted heavily into the air. They rose slowly: fueled to capacity, their bomb racks full. In a few minutes they disappeared in the cloudbank to the northward of the Philippine capital.

Another squadron followed, and another, in what seemed an endless stream. Long-range bombers only; grim, terrible machines of destruction.

The first of a flight of B-19s rolled into position. The pilot gunned his four 2,000-horsepower motors and the huge ship, the largest and most powerful bomber in the world, gathered speed. As its wheels left the runway the others followed.

From his seat in the control cabin, the commander-in-chief of the tremendous air armada glanced up from the altimeter and peered anxiously through the windshield into the impenetrable blanket of mist sweeping past in spectral wisps and spirals.

The altimeter climbed slowly from 6,000 feet to 7,000 and then to 8,000.

At 12,000 feet the windshield cleared as an ocean of cotton wool clouds fell away below and lay bathed in the eerie radiance from a thin sliver of moon. This was as the meteorological officer at the field had promised, and would afford a protective screen almost to their objective.

The commander-in-chief spoke briefly into the mouthpiece of his headset and the armada closed into formation.

IT WAS beginning to gray in the east as the cotton-wool ocean came to an abrupt end, and the Pacific appeared dark and forbidding thousands of feet below. To the west and north, directly ahead, Japan lay spread in a dark smudge that grew more distinct as the red arc of the sun thrust up over the horizon and it was day.

"On the nose!" the commander-in-chief muttered, consulting the flight map strapped to his knee. Everything was working out exactly according to plan. There was not a hostile plane in sight. The element of surprise would be complete.

The coastline loomed nearer. Now they were exactly over it.

Ahead lay Tokyo, a patchwork of gray and green interlaced by the silver thread of the Sumida River and a

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spidery network of canals. Not far away Yokohama sprawled beside a white line of breakers.

The commander-in-chief felt his belly muscles grow taut; but his voice was calm as he gave his orders.

The armada broke up into squadrons and smaller units, each with an assigned objective.

The commander-in-chief spoke into the interplane telephone and the great ship nosed over slightly.

To the left and a thousand feet or so below a white ball of smoke mushroomed out suddenly. Tokyo's anti-aircraft defenses, caught flat-footed, were coming to life. More white puffs appeared, to the right and above.

The ship lightened with an upward jolt as the first stick of its eighteen-ton bomb load dropped away earthward.

A crater of flame erupted on the gray-and-green patchwork below—was quickly covered by a black blob of smoke. The commander-in-chief could not see it, but the gunner crouched in the rear turret could.

"Direct hit, sir. Gas or oil tanks I think," his voice came through the earphones.

Other craters erupted, incendiaries winked redly as they started fires which spread rapidly through the flimsy houses of paper and bamboo.

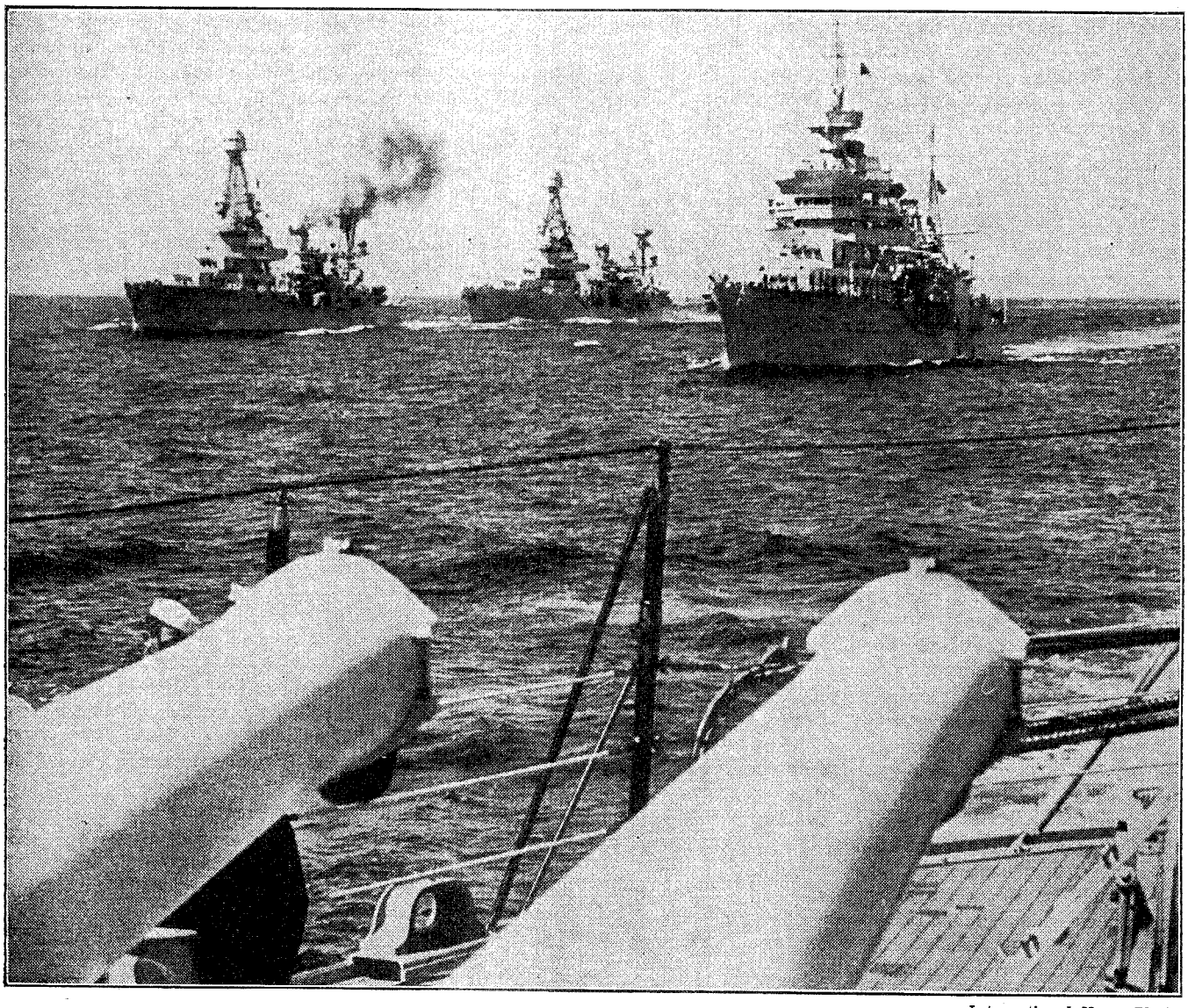
A swarm of interceptor planes, the red sun of the Empire on wings and fuselages, rose to the attack. But they were too few—and too late. The damage had been done. And they were no match for the heavier cannon carried by the American bombers. Hit by explosive shells, they seemed to stop suddenly and fall to pieces in the air.

Some penetrated the barrage and came to grips with their larger opponents, machine guns yammering. A flying fortress faltered, fell off on one wing and went into a spin. Another crumpled under an A.A. burst and plummeted toward the earth trailing smoke.

An interceptor, its pilot imbued with the fanatical frenzy of the Japanese fighting man, zoomed into position high above a B-19, nosed over in a screaming power dive and crashed the great bomber head on. The two ships went down locked in a flaming embrace.

. . . In a comparatively few minutes the raid was over. The American bombers had dropped hundreds of tons of explosives and dealt Nippon a crushing blow.

Their work done, they scudded away southward for the protection of the cloudbank, leaving Tokyo in the grip of a panic such as it had not known since the earthquake of 1923. A holocaust raged through its paper houses. The main power plant had been put out of commission. Water mains everywhere were broken and useless.



International News Photo

One picture the Jap spies don't have to take: a preview of our naval muscles

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The railway station in the Kojimachi district was a mass of smoking wreckage, the treasury building nearby in ruins. Military barracks had been leveled and the Bridge of Japan yawned in the middle from a direct hit.

Yokohama, eighteen miles down the Sumida, was a shambles, its docks battered and its warehouses in flames. Air fields and naval yards had been bombed mercilessly, Japan's principal submarine base destroyed, aircraft factories and munitions works crippled.

Uncle Sam, provoked at last into action, had taken a page from the dictator's own book. There would be no tongue-in-cheek muttering about "mistakes" or "regrettable accidents," no blandly ironic "so sorry" from the State Department in Washington. Uncle Sam had done his talking with his fists.

And it was up to the Empire of the Rising Sun to put up —or shut up!

IMPOSSIBLE? Don't believe it! But improbable—maybe: for the small brown men of Nippon find themselves hoist on a petard of their own making.

For years Japan has been a private battleground with three cliques—the army, the navy and big business, each with its respective satellites—all struggling for the favor of the emperor and the power that goes with it. Although the fight has been carried on entirely under the surface it has been bitter, relentless, and with no holds barred.

With the army finally installed as top dog, Japan embarked on her "punitive" adventure into China in 1937.

That little undeclared war, Chinese sources claim, has already cost the land of the chrysanthemum some two million of its best young men in killed and wounded, 25,000 prisoners, 2,000 planes, 13,000 tanks and armored cars, and thousands of rifles, machine guns and pieces of artillery.

Unquestionably it has cost her billions of yen, the respect of the decent-thinking nations of the world, and bled her white economically.

When Japan started her bold-faced grab for territory and markets, something she figured could be successfully accomplished in a matter of weeks, the United States protested vigorously. There was talk of sanctions and embargoes. But the supremely confident Nipponese army went arrogantly ahead.

Now the aspect of the Pacific picture has altered.

When Japan began to view with alarm the aid pouring into China from the United States and hinted broadly that it stop, Uncle Sam replied by sending more money, more guns and more planes.

To hamstring the flow of aid to China, Nippon put pressure on the British to close the Burma Road. England, with plenty of trouble of her own, acquiesced. But it didn't stay closed long; and experts in foreign affairs credit its reopening to the fine hand of Uncle Sam injecting a little stiffening into the British lion's back.

Japan has long had her eyes on even fatter fields of conquest than China, which probably accounts for her alliance with Hitler. Expecting Britain to lose control of the Mediterranean and collapse of her own weight, the small brown men visioned a march over a supine and impotent Uncle Sam southward through the Phillipines, the Dutch East Indies, British Malaya, French Indo-China, Singapore and even to Australia. They started on Indo-China. . . .

But the British neither collapsed nor lost the Mediterranean and Uncle Sam remained annoyingly firm. And when the Nipponese suggested the possibility of a move into the apparently helpless Dutch East Indies they were told by the Free Dutch to *keep off!* The warning came in no uncertain terms, for it had England and the United States firmly behind it.

But Could America Take It?

Tokyo in ruins: a grim picture, but not impossible. We know only too well the tragic stories of Madrid, Warsaw, Amsterdam, London . . .

What about New York?

The Atlantic has shrunk; enemy bombers can make it easily enough. When would they come? What damage could they do? How are we preparing against them —now?

ARGOSY has gone out after the answers, and has gotten them. No American who values his life and safety should miss Robinson MacLean's authoritative account:

Nazi Terror Over New York

coming in the ARGOSY for October 4—on sale Sept. 24

Recently Nippon has been agitating for the United States to remove the fleet and its supporting bombers from the Pacific "in the interest of Japanese-American rapprochement." But the fleet stayed: and more and longer-range bombers landed in Hawaii and at Manila.

Nor were the Japanese pleased with the recent remarks of Paul V. McNutt, Federal Security Administrator and former High Commissioner of the Philippines. Speaking at the exercises commemorating the fourth anniversay of the Sino-Japanese war he denounced Japan as a "partner of Axis thuggery" and declared that "the time has come to act" in the Pacific. It sounded too much like a challenge to the Nipponese war clique, already enraged at their inability to overawe the United States.

FOR Americans ought to remember: Japan is essentially an industrial and maritime nation whose economic existence depends upon imports of raw materials to be manufactured into goods for export and sale.

Right now she is so hard up for raw materials that her dwindling stocks of rubber, metals, chemicals, oil, wool and cotton are rigorously rationed.

Her people have long ago given up little things like toothpaste, golf balls, chewing gum, teacup decorations, toy balloons and bathing suits. They have even given up the small piles of salt that stood beside their doorways to ward off evil spirits and bring good luck. Her scientists are trying to find a process that will make leather out of rat skins.

As far back as 1938 the government asked match manufacturers to reduce the length of each match stick .029 of an inch to conserve wood.

Her farmers—who pay sixty percent of their earnings to the government—have been compelled to sell their sixteen- to twenty-three-year-old daughters into service in the Yoshiwara, Japan's red-light district, for yen enough to keep body and soul together. The girls bring anywhere from three dollars to 300 dollars; and the farmers are beginning to grumble.

Japan is desperate for foreign exchange—and plenty of other things. Most of her scrap iron came from the United States; she isn't getting it now. Desperate need for rice—the bare fundamentals of life itself—was one of the prods to her reckless thrust into Indo-China.

Economically the Yellow Menace, that terrible bogey man of the Pacific, is nothing but a hollow shell. *And no nation so unsound economically could hope to take on a first-class power in a major war and win.*

Most of us visualize a war in the Pacific merely in terms

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of a naval action in which the fleets of Japan and the United States would fight it out in a great sea engagement on whose outcome the result of the war would hinge.

Some naval expers assert that the Japanese fleet with its four new 23-ton battleships—each mounting twelve 16-inch guns—and with the *Kongo,* which is the world's most powerful battle cruiser, out-tons and out-guns us. Others fear that our fleet has been so weakened by withdrawals to the Atlantic to protect the advance into Greenland and Iceland and keep the sea lanes open that we are now no match for the Nipponese in the Pacific.

But every such weakening has been more than counterbalanced by the addition of air power, long-range bombers and flying patrol boats; and the preponderance of opinion is that our naval forces have no equal in the Pacific.

WAIT, though! There's more to it than that. America—*and Japan!*—had better keep in mind that other things than guns, ships, and planes can whip a nation at war. There's a human balance that the brown war lords might well remember.

For example—United States Navy gunners are the most accurate in the world; and the men of the fleet are convinced that they can lick twice their weight in assorted wildcats.

And they'd be willing to prove it.

That is not to imply that the Japs are not good fighters. There are no better anywhere. Their devotion to their Emperor, whom they venerate as the Son of Heaven, amounts to a religious fanaticism.

Their discipline is remarkable. Soldiers embarking for China were ordered to fight until their ammunition gave out, then club their rifles. When those broke they were to fight on with their knives; their knives useless to fight with their fingernails. Some unquestionably turned themselves into human bombs to blow a way through the enemy barbed wire for the advancing infantry.

It is an open secret that the Japanese have been experimenting with a one-man submarine that is little more than a glorified torpedo, and from which there is no way for the navigator to escape.

Mussolini's "Desparata Squadron", pledged to crash their dive-bombers into the British battlewagons and wipe them off the Mediterranean, never quite jelled; but its Japanese equivalent probably would.

It's tough to tangle with fighting men like that.

But warfare today, as Herr Hitler has demonstrated, depends on smoothly operating machines even more than on charging men. And—listen, America!—Japanese scientists and engineers are found wanting in the balance. *They are not so hot.*

All right: the Japanese are excellent imitators and copyists; but they are a literal people with an absolute minimum of imagination.

Their spy system pokes its inquisitive fingers everywhere; but the catch is—as recent events on the West Coast demonstrated—that it is satisfied to spend thousands of dollars and risk the necks of its master spies—for a stack of old magazines.

This spy system, in the early days of aviation, gathered secret blueprints of warplanes under construction in Europe and America. After considerable study Japanese engineers decided that the French ship had the best tail assembly, the British the best fuselage, the German the best wings and the American the most efficient engine. Painstakingly, methodically, humorlessly they set about constructing a ship of their own that would embody all these "best" features—and were utterly amazed when it wouldn't fly.

This would be unbelievable—if it weren't true.

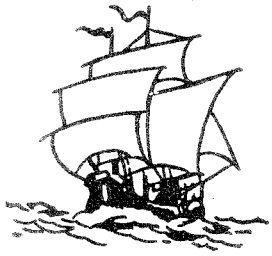
One of their early battleships turned over shortly after it was launched for much the same reason.

And only a short time ago Japanese commercial agents purchased two of a newly perfected type of flight instrument. Rushed to Japan, one was taken apart for study. Engineers recognized at once that its operation depended upon the difference in expansion of a bow made of three different kinds of metal laminated together. One of these metals was shiny like chromium, the second blue, the third copper-colored.

The Japs made an ingenious replica of the instrument: careful, complete, thorough, meticulously copying that all-important bow. One of its laminated metal strips was shiny like chromium; the second was blue; the third copper-colored. But it wouldn't work.

No: stout-hearted men alone can't win wars. Nor the biggest battleships with the longest guns. Wars today are won by the efficient organizations of men and machines that *work* just a little better than the other fellow's.

We have the men and the machines, and the money to keep them running; and if the little brown men of Nippon speak out of turn Uncle Sam can take them with considerably less difficulty than it cost Grant to take Richmond.



Backache, Leg Pains May Be Danger Sign

Of Tired Kidneys—How To Get Happy Relief

If backache and leg pains are making you miserable, don't just complain and do nothing about them. Nature may be warning you that your kidneys need attention.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking excess acids and poisonous waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

If the 15 miles of kidney tubes and filters don't work well, poisonous waste matter stays in the blood. These poisons may start nagging backaches, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from the blood. Get Doan's Pills. (Adv.)

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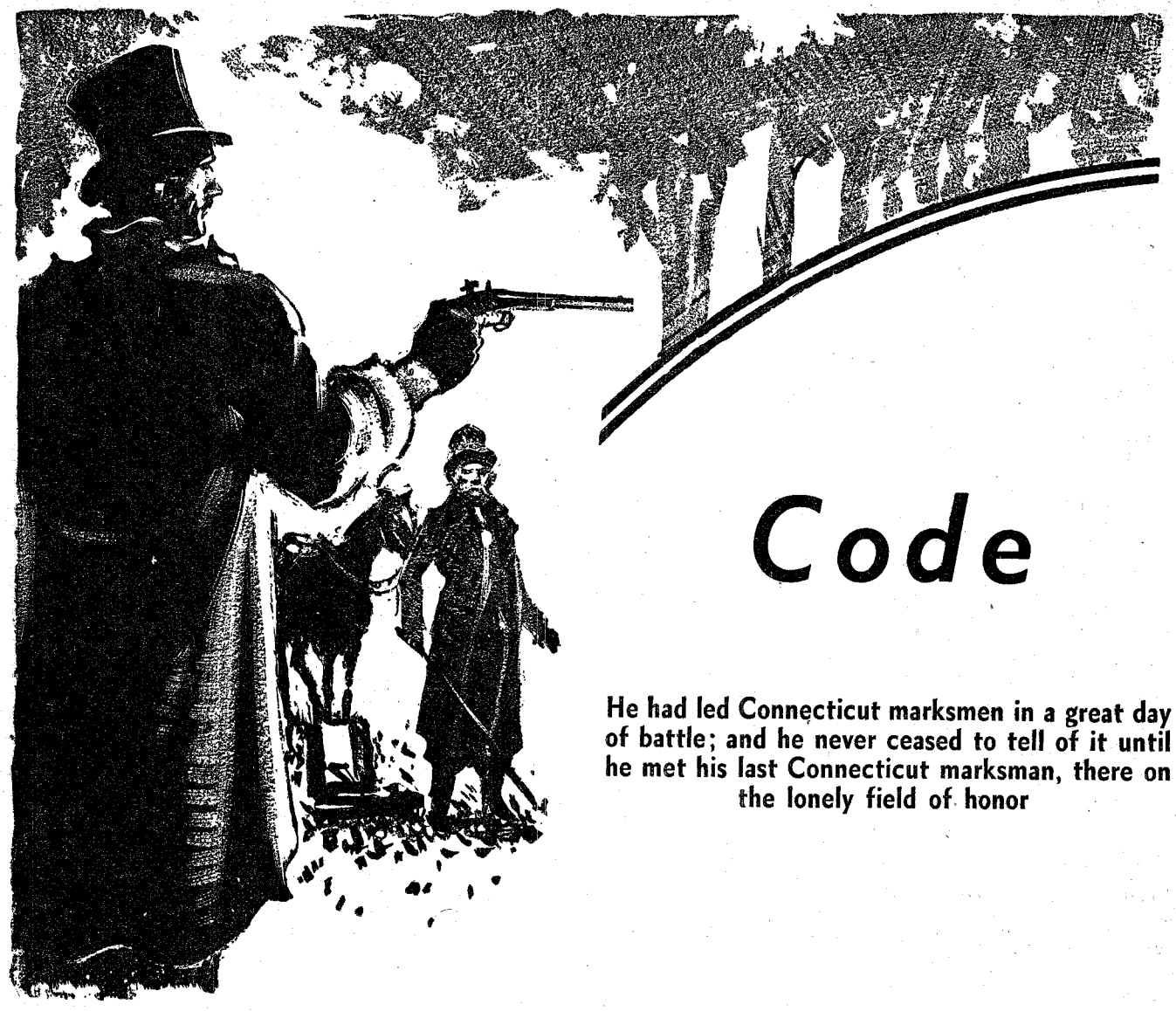

Code

He had led Connecticut marksmen in a great day of battle; and he never ceased to tell of it until he met his last Connecticut marksman, there on the lonely field of honor

MAJOR RUTLEDGE, the well-known duelist, was early on the field as he always punctiliously had been. This time, to be sure, he came without his coach-and-four; without his postilions and his liveries, such as he had used in former days of his grandeur. This time he could sport nothing better than a common snatch-cab from the streets of Washington.

Yet he came, with his pistol-box on his knees, his second sitting beside him, and his old black Shadrach alongside the driver, too.

"Much as usual," the major observed, dishousing himself from the cab like a majestic snail. "Ah! How sweet it is to smell the lilacs of Bladensburg once more!" he said, patronizing the dawn-lit hills of Maryland over his bulbous nose. "Thank you, m'lad; thank you, Henry. Come along, my boy!"

His second, who was also his young grand-nephew, stepped out behind him with a rebellious and disapproving grimace at the lordly command.

"You Shad. Damn that rascal! Where's my cloak?" the major demanded.

Shadrach had hopped down from the seat like an elderly blackbird. Hastily he tried to throw a garment of some sort over his master's shoulders. But Major Rutledge caught sight of it.

"Wait. What's that? Eh? That's no cloak of mine. . . . Why, what the devil is it?" He examined the thing with a shaky hand and eyes like red-rimmed marbles. "Why, demmit; it's nothing but a rug. A rag rug. A demned, ragged rag rug!" he began to roar.

Until Shadrach touched his arm with a deft, accustomed warning; and quick as a trained old war-horse—or an old circus horse, perhaps more like—he took the tip to his dignity.

"Harrumph. Ah—arrumph!" he rumbled. "Well, well; never mind. It's no matter." And though his lips were blue and he shivered with the keen morning air he braced himself in martial style.

"Ha. No by Ged, seh. What are the chills of Bladensburg to an old campaigner like me? Though by Ged, it was not so chilly but demned hot, seh, on that day of August, eighteen fourteen, when we met the British on this very field.

"I was hereabouts with a batch of demned conscripts. From the No'th, seh. From Connecticut, in fact. I had command of a company of them when the enemy marched up over the hill yonder."

"I know, I know, Uncle Ned," said Henry impatiently. "I've heard it all before."

"Permit me, seh, to demonstrate, if you please." The major now had the needed support of his hickory cane—Shad having quietly slipped it to him, while filching away the pistol-case and the ragged shawl.

"Observe. Harrumph! . . . I was posted near this actual

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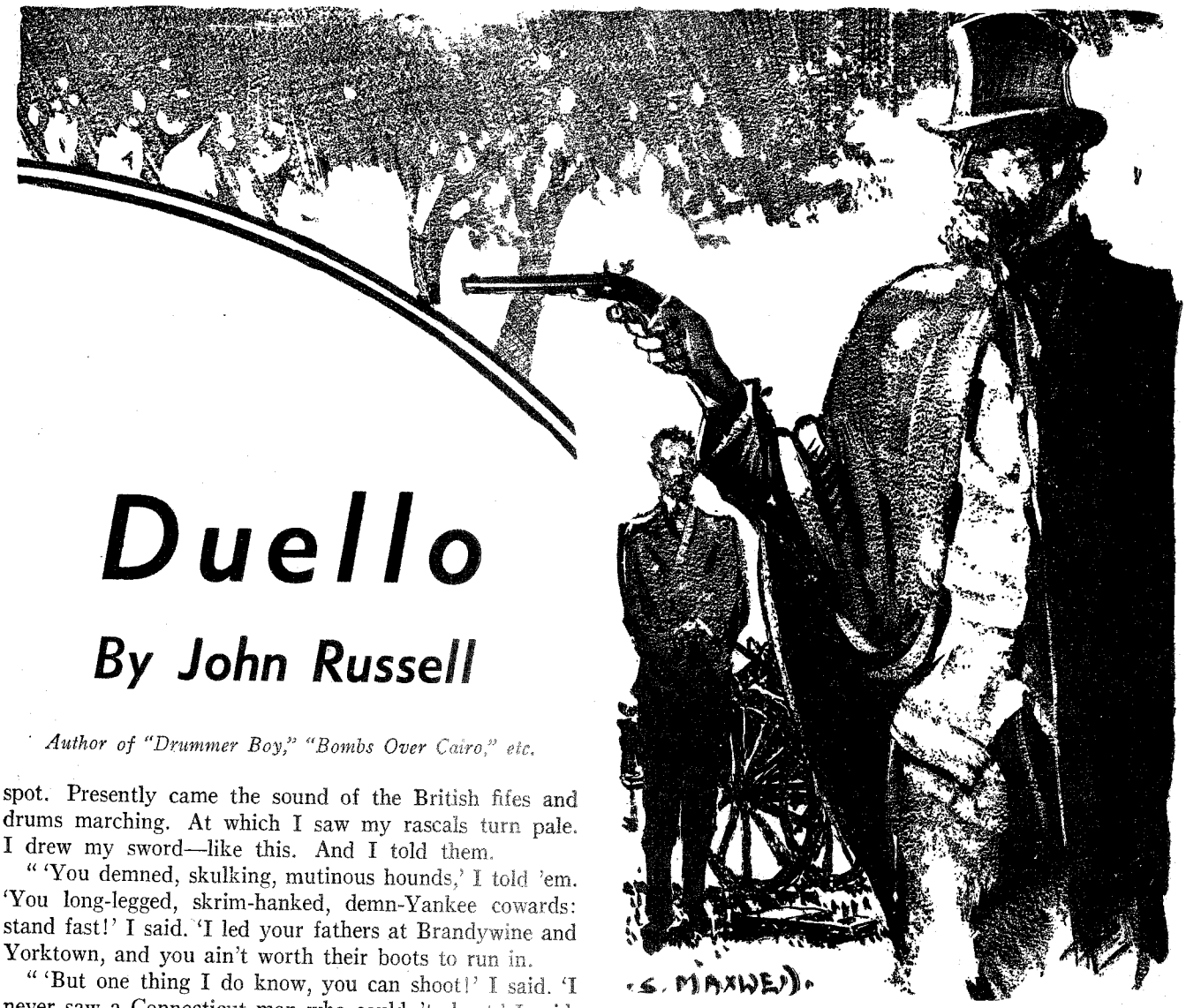

They squared off then according to the doctor's directions, ready to kill by the *code duello*

Duello

By John Russell

Author of "Drummer Boy," "Bombs Over Cairo," etc.

spot. Presently came the sound of the British fifes and drums marching. At which I saw my rascals turn pale. I drew my sword—like this. And I told them.

" 'You demned, skulking, mutinous hounds,' I told 'em. 'You long-legged, skrim-hanked, demn-Yankee cowards: stand fast!' I said. 'I led your fathers at Brandywine and Yorktown, and you ain't worth their boots to run in.

" 'But one thing I do know, you can shoot!' I said. 'I never saw a Connecticut man who couldn't shoot,' I said. 'Now for Ged's sake, and the American Army; stand fast and give one volley as they come over the rise. After that you can run to Halifax and rest yo' blasted feet—blast you!' "

WARMED by his own eloquence, the major had regained a sparkle; his gaunt frame seemed to fill out and his laugh came throatily. *Wretched old ruffian: blustering boaster;* Henry thought.

But the major had still to round his heroic tale. "Well, seh, d' y' know; that's exactly what they did! When the demned Redcoats under Sir Robert Ross hove in sight, it was my company which gave 'em the only fight, and then covered the whole retreat. Connecticut marksmen, seh; under command of a superannuated, South Carolina, Revolutionary half-pay majah! If you mark what I mean, seh?"

Henry marked him, all right, as he had often enough before, between disgust and a grudging admission that the old reprobate could still carry it off. With all his bombast, with the marks of debauchery and low living so plain upon him, he retained—or Shadrach had somehow retained for him—his ancient uniform of an officer in the Continental Line, buff and blue. With a clean white stock at his neck, he could still show the front of a soldier and a gentleman.

And Henry felt rather a twinge at the blow he was about to deliver—the duty he meant to perform: as a man might feel when preparing to strike some battered idol in the face.

"That, seh, was the first time that ever I saw the 'bloody swards of Bladensburg'," the major continued, complacently. "Since then I have been out here—oh, perhaps ten or a dozen times. . . . Shall we follow Shad along to the dueling-ground?"

Henry Rutledge seized the opportunity. "Wait, Uncle Ned! See here. You don't have to go through with this—this combat. This meeting, today. And I'm here to tell you, you are *not* to do it!"

The major halted on his cane. "Ha?" he exclaimed, amazed. "What's that you say, Henry?"

"It's what you need to hear. You don't have to fight this man Jarvey today. You profess to follow the rules of the *code duello,* I believe. There is no rule compelling you to fight a shady adventurer, a common blackleg without the claim to any gentility!"

"Explain yourself, Henry."

"I will. I inquired about this fellow. He calls himself Collector Jarvey, from some place in the far North. The title is meaningless. He is checked by the police as a swindler and a crooked gambler, if no worse."

The major's brow was a thunder-cloud.

"Why didn't you tell me before?"

"Because I couldn't find you last night, though I hunted you in all the stews and pothouses where you generally

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hang out!" Henry retorted bitterly. He was aware that like a zany he had started on too high, too nervous a key. But he reminded himself that he had his own importance as a rising young attorney with social connections to protect. "And I'm telling you now: you will have to cancel this disgraceful business!"

"Seh!" said the major, in a gathering roar, "The dog struck me!"

"You should have had him arrested."

"What? He accused me of cheating at cards!"

"THAT'S what you get for mingling with the sort of riff-raff you do," returned the other, with sheer, youthful brutality. "People regard you as a brawler of the taverns. A bravo. A worn-out old swashbuckler whose day is done!"

"Henry. Henry!"

"Oh, don't try to threaten me! I can't be bluffed like the others. And it's true what they say. You are known to have killed six or seven men."

"Aff—affairs of honor, seh," gasped the major.

"You call them so. But you have given your name—which is also my name, if you please—a most dishonorable notoriety." *Good phrase that,* he commended himself. *Now's the time to settle the old nuisance off-hand.* It was not that he actually enjoyed being cruel; but his self-righteousness might have been diagnosed in later days as somewhat sadistic.

"One more point I must make," he went on. "I have to inform you that your claim for a half-pay pension has been disallowed by the War Department. That makes any further borrowings on any such expectation impossible. . . . Now Uncle Ned, sir, I don't mean to be unkind, and I'll make you a proposition. If you will cancel today's affair—which you easily can do on a plea of ill-health—and if you will henceforth alter your course of life conformably, I will personally see to it that you are cared for in respectable circumstances.

"Otherwise," the virtuous and ruthless young man declared, "otherwise I must tell you that you have run out your string!"

The major's voice, when he spoke, was a mere wheezy echoe. "Run out my string. . . ."

"So far as I can see; yes," said Henry, deliberately. "Whom have you left who will trust you, or care a single continental what happens to you? Who gives a fig, sir—at your age—for your pretenses and your hectorings? Which they know to be worthless."

"Worthless," the major repeated, feebly.

"Quite worthless!"

For a moment, the major might have seemed to sway a little. But just then from nowhere apparently—or like a bird from the bush—his old black servant Shadrach popped up at his side once more, just brushing his arm.

The major, whose face had gone the color of a ripe mulberry, slowly loosened the stock under his collar. Lifting his gaze, he casually surveyed the landscape: the trees and the hills, and the long shadows cast by the new-risen sun; took with a long breath the sweet air of the countryside as if he owned it.

"Quite right, seh," he observed, with perfect urbanity. "I thank you for your friendly expressions. Ah—arrumph! . . . And by the way. What was the title you gave to this—ah—this person we are about to meet this morning? If I may ask, and as it were: 'what imports the nomination of this gentleman?'" He said it with satisfaction.

"He calls himself Collector Jarvey, from Connecticut," Henry answered, blinking.

"Ah, yes. I remember. Harrumph! . . . Well seh; I perceive he has arrived with his party. Shall we join them on the ground?"

And swinging his cane with a flourish magnificent once more, he led the way, with a step assured and familiar.

DOWN below the town-road on a slight slope lay a green hollow screened by rocks and shrubbery. This was the historic "sward of Bladensburg," which so often had been stained by the proudest blood of the nation—and some not to be so very proud about, either.

By rigorous unwritten law of the time almost anybody could challenge almost anybody else to stand up and kill or be killed in proof of a thing called his "private honor." It was a humorless time. Few people could have read the line of Falstaff: "Who has honor? He who died o' Wednesday." Fewer would have smiled at it.

It was a dull time. Historians were going to set it down as The Era of Good Feeling. Perhaps because people fought so much.

People nourished an absolutely passionate obsession for "defending their names;" they studied how to "demand satisfaction" from any enemy real or fancied; to "call him out;" to "invite him the field." Many a criminal covered his crimes with this convention. And many a valued, able citizen paid his life for it; under penalty of "being posted as a poltroon and a coward."

Men fought for a word, for a look, for an argument on Aristotle. For the speed of a horse, for the color of a ribbon, or the flicker of a lady's eye-lash. For any trifle.

Yet there was nothing trifling about the encounter which now took place, this lovely spring morning, between Major Ned Rutledge and Mr. Collector Jarvey. The affair began and proceeded with the precision of a parade—and with entirely deadly intent.

. . . Three men who had tethered their horses nearby were already in waiting. One was the opponent: a thin man almost as tall as the major, and possibly half his age. He wore a tight surtout of rat-brown velvet and a lofty plug hat, which he thumbed stiffly at the major's rigid salute, then tilted forward over his eyes: a formidable and aggressive figure.

His second was a nondescript person in corduroys, something like a racetrack tout.

The third man was old Doctor Foresco, the great expert on gun-shot wounds: a frosty-haired and frosty-faced little specimen. He and Major Rutledge having met before and frequently in these circumstances, they allowed themselves to exchange nods almost as professional as the greetings of an operating room. Whereafter he opened the ceremony in strict accordance with the code.

"I will ask both seconds please to advance and assist in loading the weapons."

WHAT else was there for Henry to do? How could he evade it? Since his futile protest the major had simply ignored him; he had had to trot along as a small-part actor. Now it was too late to refuse the service expected of him.

And besides, there was really not much crusading spirit to Henry; not enough to make a public exhibition. So presently he found himself measuring powder and tapping bul-

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lets together with the nondescript person in corduroys.

They loaded the major's pistols; beautiful and fateful objects of an exquisite workmanship. Dr. Foresco supervised everything. This curious character must have taken some recondite pleasure from getting his clients, or patients, killed well and cleanly. He even tested the flints and the primings.

Finally with the skill of a conjuror he whisked both pistols inside a white silk kerchief and offered first choice, sight unseen, to the nondescript fellow. Quite properly, of course, as being the lawful right of the challenged party.

"Gentlemen," he said sharply, "according to the terms agreed upon, there will be an exchange of shots at eight paces. I have already marked the exact distance on the turf. Gentlemen," he said, with the rasp of a bone-saw, "place your principles!"

Mechanically Henry obeyed. He showed the major to his indicated position and handed him a pistol. The nondescript did the same for Mr. Jarvey. The two adversaries took their stance side-to-front, regarding each other over their right shoulders, each with the armed right hand held against the thigh.

Henry felt a throb at his heart. He couldn't help that; and he couldn't help marveling. He *did* marvel at that grand old sinner, his great-uncle. Here was a man he had seen just before as a sort of wind-blown human wreck, bleary and fatuous. Presently shaken with a senile resentment.

Yet here he was—without so much as a drink to fortify him after a drunken night. Here he stood, and seemed to loom gigantic. Stood and stayed like some druidical oak: stern and menacing.

It made young Henry quail; the very look of him. And it made young Henry wonder, confusedly, whether there might not be something after all to this theory of conduct by which the old Bombastes Furioso had lived all these years. Whether there might not be a source of strength, of courage and manhood—even of nobility—in this outworn *code duello*, after all.

"Attention, please," Dr. Foresco was saying. "I shall count 'One—two—three: Fire.' At the word I drop this kerchief. From which instant, but not before, the combatants are permitted to deliver at will. . . . Are you ready, gentlemen? . . . One!" he began

Henry had space only for a belated thought. Eight paces? It was murder! How often had he seen his Uncle Ned snuff the wick of a candle at ten, at twelve, without nicking the wax! *Well*, he thought, with a purely human and partisan thrill, *anyway*, he thought, *I'm sorry for Mr. Jarvey.*

"Two . . . Three . . . Fire!"

THE kerchief dropped: a shot slammed across the meadow. While it still echoed, Major Rutledge took a half-turn, and slid quietly to the grass. At once Shadrach, Henry and the doctor, all three, rushed to support him.

"It's all right, m' boys," he murmured. "Thanks so much. Mighty kind of you, seh," he said to Foresco, who knelt to flip open the buttons of his coat. "Everything quite correct at your hands, seh."

"Not so correct at yours!" the doctor retorted, reproachfully. "Major, I'm surprised at you, getting yourself popped off that way!"

The major smiled a little, with gentle humor.

"Well, seh. And plenty high time, too—don't you think? And demned lucky. Gives me a chance to say something. I've a paper put away somewhere. But this is much better. I take you to witness, sehs." He smiled at each of them.

"As regarding this demned old rascal of mine Shadrach. I'm giving him his freedom. All I have to give, and always meant to do it. Understand me, sehs? Witnesses. Shad—henceforth—free. . . . Ar-rumph!"

He coughed, quite in his style, and gave his last impersonation. His scarred old face had softened with benevolence and generosity. He made the perfect image of a grand patriarch, munificent and magnificent, taking leave of a grateful humanity. "Ah!" he breathed, serenely. "How sweet it is to pass amid the scented memories of Bladensburg!"

"Say. Hey! Hold on, gents." It was the nasal drawl of Mr. Collector Jarvey, who had drawn near soft-footed and unnoticed. His sharply whittled nose seemed to twitch with rodent-like suspicion. "What's going on yere? Wait a minute!"

Foresco glanced up at him. "I'm afraid you're too late, Mr. Collector," he said, frostily. "Major Rutledge couldn't wait that long."

"Daid?"

Foresco nodded. "You don't care much, do you?"

Jarvey bit himself a chew of tobacco. "Not any. But I care a heap what he was saying jest now. He was aimin' to set free this nigger of his—warn't he?"

"Well?"

"I'm yer to state he can't do it. That nigger is still good to fetch three-four hundred dollars. And your major-man, he owed me considerable more."

"What of it?"

"Wal, if he ain't left nothing else, I reckon I'll jest take the nigger along my own self."

The little doctor stood up. "You can't make a claim like that against a dying man's last word! Mr. Rutledge and I are witnesses. It's the same as a will."

"Not much it ain't. And even if it was, the law don't allow no man to will away his property while he's got legal debts outstanding. I got a fistful of notes this-yer major signed to me last night."

"Gambling debts."

"If they was, t'wouldn't show."

"Suppose neither Mr. Rutledge nor myself will recognize your claim? Suppose the Negro himself refuses to submit to it?"

The collector lifted his lip in a mirthless grin. "Wal, in such a case, I expect I'd jest naturally have to take a body attachment of this yer black body-servant. And I'd call on you two for assistance, capturing a masterless slave runnin' loose. And you'd hev to do it, too. I know my rights!"

DR. FORESCO inspected him with detachment cold as a scalpel. "Sir," he said, "my interest in your rights—or in yourself—is entirely clinical. But to save time I'll tell you something. As a matter of fact, Shadrach is nobody's property. He is a free man, and has been for many years. In his own rights!"

"Hey? . . . Don't try that gammon on me!" Jarvey sneered. "Didn't I hear what the major said?"

"He couldn't help that; and it meant nothing. It was just his gesture. Major Rutledge never could resist a gesture, or a flourish, or a chance to show off in any sort of company, any time. It was his basic weakness, sir, and the tragedy of his life. The means by which he lost every

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single thing he ever possessed—his fortune, his loves, his good name and reputation. A fundamental falsity in the man that left him at last as hollow as a drum—as hollow as this *code duello* he pretended to follow. Do you understand me, Mr. Collector?"

"No, I don't," Jarvey snapped. "And what's more I don't believe it!"

The doctor shrugged aside the proffered quarrel. "I'm not here to defend him," he said.

"What I mean, I got a right to doubt your information. I certainly heard the major-man tryin' to give the nigger free. If he already done it, or gambled him, or sold him, it ain't legal. I can replevin."

"You might, if the major parted with anything he owned. What I'm trying to tell you: *he never even owned* the Negro Shadrach!"

"You couldn't prove such a yarn."

"I don't care to prove anything. But I could refer you to the Probate Court of Fairfax County. You'll find that Shadrach was born at Mount Vernon. He was one of the slaves who were freed by the will of *General George Washington!*"

It staggered the collector. "Huh? Who could get to know it for a fact?"

"Well, I know it. Mr. Henry knows it."

"Everybody in the city knew it," Henry put in.

"Only the major didn't know we knew," said Foresco, with a grim twist. "Hence his gesture. Don't you *see?*"

The wrath of a rat flared in Jarvey's thin, feral face. "Wal, I be good Go' damned! I guess I see how I been cheated again, right enough. Why, that damned old thimble-rigger!" he said. "That Go'damned lousy, lyin' old faker and fraud . . . Nothing but a humbug and a hypocrite to the end!"

Worse things, he said, and said them over the poor dead body lying there, defenseless. With the torn-open coat showing its scrawny, pitiful nakedness; with the bullet wound showing on its shrunken ribs like a burnt hole in an empty basket. Unseemly things he said: far beyond hatred. And nobody stopped him, or answered him. Not Doctor Foresco, who did not care; and not Henry, who did not dare.

BUT it was a terrible time for Henry, youthful and helpless. He had a miserable sense of this final humiliation being heaped upon the soul and the memory of his great-uncle. True: he had said the same sort of abusive things himself; or just nearly. And so had Dr. Foresco—or implied them. But it was different to hear the old major actually abused in such terms: to see him actually so spat upon by such an enemy!

He had a fantastic vision of that unhappy wraith of a grand old man, chased out into eternity. Stripped. Bereft of every shred, every remaining tatter, of the respect and the dignity and the honor which once he had so cherished. Without a single living creature left to help him, or to protect him, or defend him.

Until presently Collector Jarvey gave a check and pointed. "Hey! What's that? B'damned if he ain't wearin' a money-belt! Look-a yer!"

Sure enough, there was a piece of strap holding together the poor shrunken form.

"Say: I'm a-going to search it."

Even cold-blooded Foresco had to protest. "Oh, you couldn't do that! He'd no money. And besides, you couldn't set about to rob a man you've just shot."

"Rob, hell! Ain't I got my rights?"

There can be nothing lower than this; Henry thought. *This is the lowest possible of disgrace and degradation!* he thought. When of a sudden the long gleaming steel barrel of a heavy dueling-pistol was thrust straight before Mr. Jarvey's two eyes.

"Stand back, white man. Doan' you touch Majuh Rutledge, if you please!"

It was Shadrach, the old Negro. Shadrach, born at Mount Vernon, had been trained to the manners of a grand duke. He waved the Collector away. "Step a little furder off, suh," he invited politely.

MR. JARVEY did. If there was one detail in which Mr. Jarvey had been well trained himself, it was to see when he stood within two inches of death. A dueling pistol of such caliber was the deadliest small-arm yet devised by man. Mr. Jarvey got away from it.

"Hey! Look out with that popgun, nigger!" he yelped. "It's loaded!"

"Yassuh. It sho' is," Shadrach said. And for proof he deliberately cocked the weapon, and shook up the powder in the priming-pan.

"Don't point it this way. Keep your finger off that trigger, nigger!"

"Doan' be skeered, suh. I know how to handle it all right." And in fact the darky's fist was solid as a rock. "Only keep distance from my ol' master!"

Jarvey literally hopped with rage. He took refuge in sheer chattering insult. "Your old master! A fine kind of a master! Skeered? Well I reckon he was. I thought the smoke was too thin. So that's his pistol. And he never fired at me at all!"

"No, suh. He didn't."

"Skeered. Too scared of me to fire!"

"No, suh. He wasn't scared of you, or anybody. Only when he heerd you come from Connecticut—"

Henry gave a start.

"What's that?" Jarvey snapped.

"When he heard you come from Connecticut, and you would nacherally be a daid shot, like you is—why, then Majuh Rutledge took the nacheral way out, suh."

"As how?"

"Why, as any gentleman should, suh, when a gentleman is tired of fighting. He jest nacherally stood your shot, and never fired in return hisself. It's accordin' to the laws of the *code duello.*"

But Collector Jarvey was not satisfied: he couldn't take it: he had to jeer and snarl.

"But you—*you!*" he insisted. "If Doc Foresco is right, you've been a free man all these years. Not a slave, but a free man. Must be twenty years!"

"More than that, suh."

"And you served this major, without being his slave? I don't believe it!" Jarvey snarled.

While keeping the pistol steadily pointed, Shadrach knelt on one knee. Reverently he drew the ragged rag rug over the poor dead form and face of Major Ned Rutledge. Just when the sun was coming up like a benediction, up over Bladensburg.

"He was my friend, sir!" said Shadrach, the old black Negro, simply.

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Warikugi grinned his toothy grin as the crucial slip of paper seemed to leap from his fingers. Earnshaw was helpless

Dead Men Don't Float

By Joel Townsley Rogers

Author of "Pink Diamonds," "Locusts from Asia," etc.

It was only a bottle, bobbing on the water, labelless and sinister, carrying a scrawled, tragic message that was the opening gambit in the one-man war of wits that Rob Earnshaw was waging on the Japanese Navy. . . . Complete Novelet.

I

THE BOTTLE FLOATED in the dark green water, sluggishly rising and falling among the mossy rotted piles of the old tumbledown pier which jutted out from the mangrove swamp shore, a hundred feet away from where the big Japanese destroyer, the *Ashewashi,* lay moored in channel.

It was a squat brown bottle with a cork in it, and the neck was a pale amber, as if inside was something white.

Its label had washed off it. It might have been in the water ten hours or ten years. There was nothing about it to catch the eye, in the seaweedy shadows where it floated back under the end of the old pier, except that glint of amber at its neck. Lieutenant-commander Earnshaw of the U.S.S. *Wanderley,* spruce in tropic whites and with his service ribbons on his breast, observed it idly from his seat in the stern of the *Wanderley's* captain's gig. His lean sun-golden face brightened and his eyes—the shrewd wrinkled eyes of those who watch the sea the world over—grew purposeful, as the one-lung little launch putted past the *Ashewashi's* quarter and down along the shadow of her long gray steel plates toward her starboard gangway ladder. Earnshaw was making his courtesy call on the skipper of the big Japanese flotilla leader, which he had found lying in at Lava-Lava when the *Wanderley* had come limping in late last evening.

"They do it everywhere," he said to his executive officer, Lieutenant (junior grade) Malone, with a grin.

"What's that, sir?" said Paddy Malone.

Rob Earnshaw nodded. "A bottle with a note in it," he said. "Last message of some shipwrecked sailor."

Paddy Malone looked across with his round eyes, his round, ingenuous face from which the dew of Kansas prairies had not yet dried.

"Yeah," he said alertly and curiously, "I see it. Back in the shadows beneath the pier end. It does have some sort of paper stuck inside it, doesn't it, skipper? Wonder where it ever came from, and what it says."

Rob Earnshaw smiled.

"From the ends of the world," he said. "On the tides of the seven seas. A tragic story of maritime disaster, in English, Malay, *beche mer,* pidgin, or Javanese Dutch. Perhaps a last message from Richard Halliburton, foundering in his Chinese junk in the middle of the typhoon that

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swamped him, or from Amelia Earhart, marooned with her wrecked plane on an uncharted atoll. Or from the *Flying Dutchman*. Written in an earnest but immature hand, and considerably hazy in the spelling of the long words. No mention of the lat and lonj where the ship went down, of course, and conveniently vague in other specific details. And the language always, by some strange coincidence, one spoken nearby. But a good harrowing story, anyway—if you believe it."

"I don't get you, sir?" said Paddy Malone. "Aren't you going to pick it up?"

"Am I," Rob Earnshaw said, "going to pick it up!"

"You mean you're afraid it might be only a phony, sir?" said Paddy Malone, growing red back of the ears. "What's wrong with it?"

"Did I say anything was wrong with it?" Rob Earnshaw said. "All I'm putting forward is the suggestion that, white or brown or yellow, boys are the same the world over, given an empty whisky bottle and a piece of paper and a cork. Hell, where were you brought up, anyway? In Kansas, of course, I forgot.

"I'd hate to have to count how many dead men like that my brother Rog and I used to load with horrific messages and set adrift when we were boys, summers on Cape Cod," he said with a grin. "Heart-wringing appeals for help from beautiful maidens captured by the Barbary corsairs. Gruesome stories from men drifting on ice floes up around the North Pole, keeping alive by cannibalism. Things that would make your hair curl.

"We would set them adrift in Truro on the ocean side, hoping they would be picked up out in mid-Atlantic or perhaps even float to Europe, and start the coast guards and navies of the world on a lot of frantic wild-goose chases. But they always ended up in Wellfleet five miles down the cape, and never aroused any excitement that we ever heard about. A lot of talent wasted. Poor old Rog. He was the boy who concocted them. But we had our fun out of it, anyway. I'll never see a kid's message in a bottle without thinking of those days."

"Was that your older brother who's assistant bureau-chief now, sir?" said Paddy Malone absently.

"No, my twin. He's dead now," Rob Earnshaw said. "He went into the air. We used to watch the gulls flying. It was a long time ago that we were boys."

"I'm sorry, sir."

"Why should you be? We'll all be dead sometime, and I'd hate to think we couldn't be spoken of."

THE LINES about Rob Earnshaw's mouth had deepened. He watched the bottle beneath the old pier as they drifted down along the *Ashewashi's* strakes.

"All right, there it is," he said ironically, a little tiredly. "An answer to one of the great unsolved mysteries of the seas. Don't say I didn't tip you. It's all yours, Paddy. All you need to do is take a header overside and see what's in it; and you'll be a hero, maybe. The winner of the snipe hunt. The guy who kicked the brick beneath the hat.

"But I'm not having any of it, thanks. I didn't come from Kansas, and I've read too many better. What are you still looking for—waiting for the cuckoo to pop out?"

"I was just wondering if it mightn't be an American bottle, sir," Paddy Malone said apologetically. "Quart size, and not a fifth."

"Why not? One of our most ubiquitous contributions to universal civilization, along with old automobile tires and Standard Oil cans. It's a poor beach on which a few rye and bourbon empties aren't lying around."

"I suppose so," said Paddy Malone dubiously. "It looks as if it might have come from quite a distance though. It must have been in the water a long time."

"Why?"

"Well, I don't know. I suppose—"

"Seaweed around it," said Rob Earnshaw analytically. "The suggestion of the old rotted piles and planks, and the dark mucky shore in the background. You'd look old and ripe yourself if you were floating there."

"I suppose you're right, sir," said Paddy Malone with regret. "The chances are it's just a gag. It *might* have floated from somewhere else to Lava-Lava, though, was all I was thinking. I'd like to know what it says in it, just for a joke."

"Sure," Rob Earnshaw said quietly. "We're all fish, aren't we?"

In the shadows among the mossy piles, across a hundred feet of dark green channel and milky green shore water, it rose and fell, the squat brown bottle, with only the pale amber of its neck making a glint of lightness as it stirred in the obscurity, while tropic minnows nibbled at it and seaweed floated around it with long tangled hair.

Slowly it drifted out toward the edge of the pier, toward the sunlight, in the grip of some small quiet eddy of the slack flood tide.

Paddy Malone was young and guileless. Rob Earnshaw smiled. Still he found his own gaze fastened on the faint movement of the idiotic thing as intently as his junior officer's.

He extracted a cigarette-pack from his pocket and fished out a cigarette with fumbling, absent fingers. His heart seemed to miss a beat, and he swallowed in his throat, as it hovered on the edge of the shadows, like a dead intelligence hovering on the edge of life.

It did not float out into sunlight and clearer view, however. The slack tide had no motion. It crept no more than a foot or so outward, and then, with the same slowness and eeriness, it reversed its course and swam back deeper among the piles again.

"Nuts!" Rob Earnshaw said.

He flipped the unlit cigarette into the water. It floated on the surface without motion. The launch had stopped; they had no more way on them. A sound of cackling laughter came from above him, as he straightened up and glanced around.

THEY had drifted to the landing stage of the *Ashewashi's* ladder. The boat crew were holding it fast, waiting for him. The rail overhead was lined with brown faces peering down.

"Nuts," he said as he arose. "Why be a fish? Come on."

All along the length of the lean gray Japanese flotilla leader he had been conscious, it seemed to him, in the back of his brain and the top of his skull, of those brown faces above him. The sibilant silence of an intent scrutiny. The voiceless surge of brown men's bubbling, repressed amusement over the innate comicalness of whites. They must have heard every word he said.

He was not offended. A bunch of red-necked freckled gobs on the *Wanderley* might have found the appearance of a couple of visiting brown brothers amusing in the same way. He glanced up at them with a grin.

It was the skipper of the *Ashewashi* standing just abaft

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the head of the ladder to receive him, laughing over some joke with a couple of his subordinate officers, whose cackle he had heard. Not laughing at him, necessarily. He pulled down the skirts of his white jacket as he stepped out. With Paddy Malone at his heels he went mounting up the ladder, glancing up at the Nipponese skipper beaming down.

The skipper of the *Ashewashi* was a three-striper with a broad cheerful lemon-colored face, a black bristling mustache, and a wide mouth showing a beaming expanse of white teeth. The pair of subordinate officers standing with him, a two-striper and a one-and-a-half, were of a darker and leaner and more somber sort—more predominantly Malay.

He was still grinning as Rob Earnshaw mounted up on deck, returning the salutes of the sideboys stationed by the gangway and the officer of the deck, and heeling to salute the flag at the stern.

Salute to the Rising Sun from the banner of the sunset and the starry night.

"Lieutenant-commander Earnshaw of the United States gunboat *Wanderley,* sir," Rob Earnshaw said. "My executive officer, Lieutenant Malone. Paying my compliments, sir, with your permission."

"Earnshaw!" said the beaming Japanese.

His wide smile stiffened on his face as his glance arose from Rob Earnshaw's epaulets to his face. His hand, descending and extending forward to take the American officer's, seemed to fall a little limp in mid air.

"Captain Earnshaw!" he said.

"Yes," said Rob Earnshaw with a puzzled golden frown. "We haven't met before, sir, have we? My first tour of duty in the East." His face cleared. "You are probably confusing me with my twin brother, Captain Roger Earnshaw of the Clippers, sir," he said. "He was well known all through the East. He was lost when his ship vanished somewhere between Hawaii and Manila two years ago."

"Oh, yes, I read about it in the papers. So sorry. It was the Clipper captain I was thinking of."

The little Jap's cheerful lemon smile had come back to him again. "You must excuse me," he said, speaking English that wasn't bad—that was very good, in fact. "For a moment you strike me like a ghost. All whites look alike to me, you know how saying goes. But the name also. It is a small world, as they say. My name is Commander Warikugi, humble member of His Imperial Japanese Majesty's navy. Honored by the courtesy of your visit. Would you care to inspect my ship?"

"If it would please you, sir," Rob Earnshaw said.

"But you would rather have a good drink, yes?" said the Japanese captain humorously. "You have your eyes on my quarterdeck already, I see. It is quite understandable. It is such a hot day, and life is full of empty ceremonies.

"After all, we have both seen ships before, and I do not think we have many visible surprises from each other."

He laughed for a moment, with beaming beady eyes. "Though if you wish I can have a tarpaulin lashed over the radio in the wardroom, and drop a few indiscreet hints that it is some new kind of mysterious electronic death-ray or submarine-spotter. It is, I believe, a pleasant little comedy which is supposed, among certain gentlemen with a distorted sense of humor in both our navies, to drive each other nuts. Happy to oblige you, Captain, if you wish to be driven nuts."

He did have a genuine sense of humor, all right; an eye for the comedy of life, as well as an ironic disdain of pomposity and rigamarole not common to all Japanese.

"SUPPOSE we take the inspection as having already been accomplished, Captain Warikugi," said Earnshaw with a grin. "And allow me to compliment you on the shipshapeness of your crew and ship. I can't offer you anything to drink in return, unfortunately, when and if you should do me the honor of returning my visit. However, I can perhaps save you some tedious professional inquiry and uncertainty by stating here and now that my starboard screw is fouled, which is why I came limping in last evening like a sick duck. I'll be glad to have you examine the damage at your convenience, sir."

"It makes it so much simpler that way, doesn't it?" Warikugi said with a beam. "How uncomplicated life could be! My own compatriots, I am sad to say, are often even more inclined than yours, perhaps, to small obfuscations and deceits, which are without advantage and accomplish nothing in the end. Naturally I should have to ascertain your condition for my reports, and your purpose in steaming in. Thank *you,* Captain Earnshaw, for the courtesy of the inspection of your ship, and allow me to compliment you in turn, and to wish you speedy repair of your damage. And those tedious formalities having been thus disposed of in good order and with dispatch, now for the tall ice, eh?"

"I never said no, sir." Earnshaw grinned. "Regulations for the Government of the United States Navy permitting. Frankly, I've been looking forward to it. I've heard about the famous hospitality of the Japanese navy, and a man's throat gets a little dusty after six days on a dry sea."

"Regulations for the Government of the United States Navy do not apply on board the *Ashewashi,* it is my happy privilege to assure you," the little lemon-colored Jap commander said. "Most overjoyed that the Japanese navy has some fame with you. We have humble pride in our ability to take it."

"You can certainly dish it out, sir," said Rob Earnshaw with admiration.

"We take humble pride in that, also," said Warikugi.

II

HE LED Rob Earnshaw and Paddy Malone back towards the awninged quarterdeck, with his two dark-faced officers following. Wicker chairs were drawn up there beneath the canopy, on the shady side over-looking the shoreward water. On a teakwood table brought up from the wardroom a dozen or more assorted bottles were set out, with highball glasses, a siphon, and a thermal ice tub.

"One man's poison may be another man's drink," said the commander of the *Ashewashi,* with a wave of his hand. "I had the steward set out our humble stock to afford you modest choice. A small variety of scotches and ryes, as you see. Also cognac, apricot brandy, *saki,* American rum, and vodka. I am not able to guarantee the authenticity of the labels, I regret. The commissary steward replenished supplies last in Shanghai, and they may all be the same notorious Hongkew whiskey, with slightly different flavorings in different shaped bottles. However, I hope that the eye obtains some satisfaction, at least, while the result is much the same after it's inside you. As they used

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to say when I was at Harvard, set up and name your poisons, gentlemen."

Rob Earnshaw placed his cap upon the table. He reached over with an unerring eye and picked up a squat brown bottle with a grin of satisfaction.

"Old Eagle New England rum," he said, displaying the label on it. "Put out by Peabody & Co. I didn't know it could be found anywhere west of Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. An uncle of mine owns most of the distillery, and I was practically brought up on it. I'll nominate it, if you don't mind, sir. It wasn't made in Hongkew, anyway. You can tell it by the bottle."

"'*The Law Forbids Sale or Reuse of This Bottle*'?" Commander Warikugi read, with a broad mustached smile. "I regret that even the august American legal proscription does not necessarily make it authentic, Captain Earnshaw. The same, I am sad to state, is on all bottles of so-called American liquors out of Hongkew."

"Not that alone, sir," Earnshaw said, turning the bottle around as he handed it to the captain of the *Ashewashi*. "Look at the big spread eagle stamped on its shoulder. It's the only brand that has it."

"That, too, might have been imitated, I am afraid," Warikugi said, smiling as he took it, and examining it. "We Japanese, you know, are rather clever. Even cleverer than is sometimes thought, and infinitely painstaking in details if the game is worth it. It might be your Old Eagle eagle down to the last tail-feather, and still be Jap. Yet it is quite possible," he admitted, "that there might not be sufficient demand for one particular brand of your New England rum to justify the imitation of an unusual type of bottle, and so it may be that this particular bottle is authentic. So happy if such prove to be the case."

"There's always one good way of making sure, anyway, sir," said Rob Earnshaw with a grin. "By investigating what's inside it. About three inches below the brim, and the rest ice, please."

"A credit to his uniform," said Warikugi with droll respect. "I dish it out, he takes it. The Japanese navy will not allow itself to be dishonored." He handed the tall glass of heavy brown liquor to Rob Earnshaw. "Lieutenant?"

"Scotch, sir. Any brand," said Paddy Malone, fingering his collar. "Not too much. Plenty of soda. The fact is I'm not particularly accustomed—"

"Don't let him be too modest, sir," said Earnshaw with a grin, ignoring his round-faced junior officer's anguished look. "He wears the uniform, and he's able to defend it. Four fingers for him, anyway, and damn the torpedoes."

"The Japanese navy," repeated Warikugi, "will not allow itself to be dishonored."

EARNSHAW took a sip while the lemon-colored little captain poured stiff scotches for Paddy Malone, himself, and the two dark-faced subordinate officers of the *Ashewashi*.

"Authentic," Earnshaw commented with satisfaction. He slid his palms around the glass while the cold sweat gathered on it.

"Finding a bottle of Old Eagle this far from home, and meeting you, makes it a double pleasure, sir," he declared amiably. "It's just come to me where I'd heard your name before. Rog mentioned you in some of his letters, of course. The Japanese naval officer named Warikugi at whose house he had dined several times in Chefoo, I think it was, and who had two lovely daughters. I should have recognized your name at once, and thanked you for the many kindnesses shown him."

The little Jap held up a protesting hand, stirring the drinks with a swizzle stick.

"Some other Warikugi, so sorry," he said apologetically. "I have no daughters, nor was I ever in Chefoo. I regret. Your brother never knew me, Captain Earnshaw. I did not mean to claim honor of his acquaintance. I saw him once at a bar in Singapore, perhaps, where he was pointed out to me. Or perhaps elsewhere. The famous Clipper captain. I read later in the papers that his flying ship had been lost in a tornado, was it not? So sad. So sorry."

"No," Earnshaw said. "There was no tornado. Bright clear weather. A bright clear sea. He was loaded with mail for Manila, and carried seven passengers besides the crew. Four American citizens, including a representative of our State Department en route for Tokio, a plane manufacturing technician bound for Chungking, and a couple of marine officers for the Shanghai garrison. The other three passengers were Chinese, one of them a high-ranking official of the Chiang government who was carrying half a million dollars in American currency.

"His ship reported every fifteen minutes to Manila. Then one quarter hour it didn't report. That was all. No further contact. Out over the wastes of the Pacific. The seas around his last known position were searched for weeks, but no trace of wreckage was ever found. The water is five miles deep there, one of the deepest spots on the globe."

"So sorry," said the little Japanese. "No theory of the cause of the accident, I suppose?"

"What theory could there be worth anything, sir?" said Earnshaw. "Those things happen in the air, and no one knows why. Perhaps there was some mechanical defect which blew his engines to pieces in mid-air. Perhaps—it was something else. Well—" The others had their glasses in hand, and he lifted his own gallantly. "I give you your Emperor, sir," he said. "The Tenno, the Son of Heaven!"

Commander Warikugi and the dark-faced two-striper and striper-and-a-half clicked their heels together, bowing and hissing with sucked in breath. The Japanese captain's cheerful face was suddenly blank and reverent; peaceful, doll-like, with all its lines erased, as if a hand had been wiped across it.

"The President of the United States!" Warikugi said, smiling again, and bowing.

"Bottoms up, sir!" Rob Earnshaw said.

"Banzai!" said the two dark Japanese officers, nodding and smiling.

THEY downed their long amber drinks standing. The Japs' slant eyes seemed to grow larger and more luminous in their heads. Paddy Malone gasped as he let his glass down, feeling his throat with a glassy grin; he came from Kansas, he was not a drinking man. Rob Earnshaw had a big body, and lots of it to fill. Still he felt the powerful liquor grip his own toes and curl like fog about his brain.

"Let me fill them up again," said Warikugi, beaming out of the haze. "The same for you, captain?"

"A shade less ice," said Rob Earnshaw, somewhat thickly.

"I do not need to ask you, lieutenant," Warikugi said. "I myself can do no less. Sit down, gentlemen."

The drink had brought out a sweat on his broad face.

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With a hazy grin Rob Earnshaw saw Paddy Malone collapsed in a chair, his plump damp face as pale as paper, his lips silently praying. He had warned Paddy before they set out that he would have to uphold the honor of the Navy with the brown brothers, but Paddy was finding the reality worse than the anticipation. The little Japanese commander passed the glasses around, and sat down in a cushioned chair by the rail rather heavily.

"To the seas of the world, sir," said Rob Earnshaw. "To the navies of the same. To the men who sail them, and who go down in them. To us here."

Warikugi grinned a little foolishly as he hoisted his glass, sprawling with outstretched legs in his chair. "Let us drink to your brother also," he said fondly.

"That is kind of you, sir."

"To Captain Roger Earnshaw of the Clippers!" said the little Jap, half rising.

"A thousand miles away," added Rob Earnshaw, "and five miles deep. Down the hatch!"

"Banzai!" said the two dark Jap officers, nodding and smiling. "Banzai!"

"Let me fill them up again," Warikugi said. "The same?"

"Why change a good drink in mid stream?" said Rob Earnshaw thickly.

Warikugi unhooked his collar as he sat down again. He slipped his heels out of his low white shoes, stretching out his feet along the scupper.

"It is a pleasant island, Lava-Lava," he said fondly. "Filled with riches, tropical fruits, and pleasant girls. Soon they will all belong Japanese. We are a very superior peope. Very charming and intelligent. But there is no whisky like American scotch whisky, after all. I had honorable doubts, and made honorable apologies. But I now proclaim it is not Hongkew liquor, but authentic."

"You are right, sir," Rob Earnshaw said, feeling his thick tongue with care, seeing two beaming little lemon-yellow men, black-mustached. "Let us drink to American liquor."

"To the girls and tropical fruits," said Paddy Malone, with a pale happy hiccup, slumped in the depths of his chair and far from Kansas.

"Banzai!" said Warikugi.

"Banzai!" said the two dark Jap officers, nodding and smiling in unison.

"To you, brothers," said Rob Earnshaw, hoisting his glass to them. "Name your toasts."

"They do not speak," said Warikugi, beaming sweatingly. "I speak for them. Banzai! they say. Ten thousand cheers. Japan over the whole world."

"Banzai!" said Rob Earnshaw, feeling the fog creep up his brain. "You are a great people."

III

WARIKUGI sat stretched out in his chair with his glass inverted in a lax hand over his chair arm. He grinned at Rob Earnshaw fondly. Rob Earnshaw gripped the arms of his chair and arose. He stumbled to the table and picked up the squat brown rum bottle. He turned it upside down, but it was empty. He shook it, but it still was empty.

"Dead man number one," he said.

"Dead man," repeated Warikugi, laughing drolly.

"Heave the dead man overboard," Rob Earnshaw said, flinging it with a lurch over the rail.

"Heave the dead man overboard," repeated Warikugi, laughing as he watched the bottle's flight.

"No more Old Eagle," he said thickly. "Not west of Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania."

He tore the seal off a botle of rye and unscrewed the cap of it. He stumbled to Warikugi with it.

"Let me freshen up your drink for you," he said.

"I protest," said Warikugi hazily, holding out his glass. "I am very fond of you because you remind me of your brother. So sad he die."

"All men die," Rob Earnshaw said. "What of it? It is better to die in action than to die in bed."

"The Japanese navy," said Warikugi, "will not allow itself to be dishonored."

Rob Earnshaw filled Warikugi's glass within two inches of the brim, fiercely concentrating his swaying eyes. Paddy Malone sat slumped in his chair, with his pale lips rigidly smiling, but a wretched look in his eyes, his half-finished drink firmly clasped in both plump pale hands upon his breast.

Earnshaw stood planted on his long sea legs, swaying, with sweat on his golden face and in his dark taffy-colored hair. He filled his own glass to the brim, and that about killed the quart. There were only a few drops left in the bottle, and he hoisted it and drained them.

"The curse of the Earnshaws," he said thickly. "Dead man number two."

"Heave the dead man overboard," said Warikugi, laughing childishly, watching the bottle's flight.

"It's a name for empty bottles," said Earnshaw thickly. "I don't know why. Bottles float. Dead men don't float. Not for very long, anyway."

He heard his own voice ringing in his ears from far away. He had a big body, and lots of room in it. Still it had got him, the strong raw liquors mixed. He must keep the last grip on himself. Poor Paddy was going to be sick in a few more minutes, even if he no more than breathed the fumes of the mixed liquors in his glass on his breast beneath his nose.

Across the deck Warikugi's beaming face swam, multiplied by two or three. Black bristly hair, black mustache, white beaming teeth.

"YOU started to speak," said Warikugi carefully, "of some theory of your brother's death? Not that his engines had blown up. But that perhaps, yes?"

"Hell," Rob Earnshaw said, hoisting his glass in a wavering hand. "This! The curse of the Earnshaws. He was drunk, Warikugi."

"Yes?"

"Listen," said Rob Earnshaw thickly. "Why make a secret of it? He had ordered a case of Old Eagle from the States which was delivered in Honolulu to him the day before he hopped on his last flight. Two empties were found in his quarters afterward, and one bottle was missing. He had taken it along with him. Not even an Earnshaw can hold three bottles. He just plowed his boat in."

"So sad," said Warikugi.

"Hell, sir," said Rob Earnshaw thickly. "Don't cry about it. It might spoil your drink."

Across the desk Warikugi's face beamed endlessly. "Japanese very tender-hearted," he said. "We are very sensitive people. When we feel too sad we cut our entrails out. Hari-kiri. I am very fond of you. Let us drink to our fondness."

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"To hari-kiri," said Earnshaw, with a roaring in his ears.

"To your brother, also," said Warikugi.

"Five miles deep," said Rob Earnshaw, "and a thousand miles away."

"Banzai!" saitd the two dark aides. "Banzai!"

Or did they say "B'nzai!"?

Paddy Malone got up with a white face. He staggered to the rail.

"He comes from Kansas," said Rob Earnshaw, observing this phenomenon from afar. "It is a dry state. They don't have empty bottles there."

"I am very fond of you," said Warikugi.

"He wears the uniform," Earnshaw mused, "but he can't take it. The American navy has been humiliated. I must get him back to ship."

He got up on stumbling feet and stood swaying. "The Japanese navy will never allow itself to be," said Warikugi, "dishonored. If I cannot hold my feet let us both lose our heads. It is authentic liquor. Someone took my shoes from me. Allow me to assist."

Rob Earnshaw found himself leaning against the rail, beside Paddy Malone, with a hand on Paddy's elbow. Warikugi, in sock feet, was beside him.

"Chin up," he said to Paddy Malone. "Breathe deep and keep the chin up, sailor."

"I'm all right," said Paddy Malone. "I just like to watch the water."

"Sure, I know," Rob Earnshaw said. "We poured them down too fast. The curse of the Earnshaws. Just take it quietly, sailor. We'll be going back to ship when we get our sea legs organized. Presently."

He leaned against the rail, rubbing his forehead with his big hand clumsily. There was something he tried to think about. To think about. The strong raw liquor had got him. Warikugi beside him must be quite drunk, too.

A MILE down shore the *Wanderley's* dumpy little hulk lay moored, with the star-and-sunset banner floating from her stern. The long flat mangrove swamp shore lay dank and rotten in the sun, the skyline above it cut by the feathers of tall palms. The shadow of the *Ashewashi* had broadened shoreward since they had come aboard her.

The tide had turned from the slack of flood. It had begun to run. Rob Earnshaw concentrated his wavering gaze on the bottle floating in the sunlit water halfway between the *Ashewashi's* side and the old tumbledown pier that jutted out from shore, the squat brown bottle with a cork in it, without a label, with the pale amber glint about its neck.

The bottles which he had hurled overside had floated on and down in the running tide, the bottles with the bright labels on them of Old Eagle New England Rum 100 Proof and American Glory 90 Proof Straight Maryland Rye. They drifted a hundred feet away. It was the nameless bottle which had been beneath the old pier, which was floating off the side now.

It had drifted outward from the weedy shadows in which it had been lodged, from among the mossy rotted piles, from beneath the fallen planks. It had drifted out beneath the sun, labelless, enigmatic, with the amber lightness of its neck, and, clearly visible in the sunlight sparkling, the big spread eagle stamped upon its shoulder.

Get hold of yourself! There was something which spoke to him within his brain. Get hold of yourself now! Very quietly.

"From the ends of the world," said Warikugi beside him with idle amusement, like the echo of words which he had heard in dreams. "On the tides of all the seas. A last tragic story of maritime disaster, in English, Malay, *beche mer,* or island Dutch. They do it everywhere, even in Lava-Lava. White or brown or yellow, they're the same the world over, given an empty rum bottle and a piece of paper and a cork."

He is no longer drunk, thought Earnshaw. At least no more drunk than I am now. He sees that eagle stamped upon its shoulder as clearly as I do. Be careful. Watch!

"Yes," he said thickly. "The old snipe game."

"A bottle with the eagle trademark on it," said Warikugi with droll humor. He was remembering, it seemed, what he had overheard Earnshaw say. "A rare bottle of Old Eagle New England rum. And of course it occurs to you, in spite of all your arguments against it, Captain, that your brother might have remembered those old boyhood games he played with you, and written some message, real this time, telling of what had happened to him, and have put it into the rum bottle which he had on board his Clipper with him, to float till it was found—if he had the time and opportunity to do so."

ROB EARNSHAW leaned against the rail with his fists locked together. He did not look at the little smiling lemon-colored man beside him. He did not look at the bottle with too much eagerness, either. Yet there was sweat upon his fists where he held them locked together, and sweat upon his face.

"That's a pretty far-drawn possibility, sir," he said thickly.

"Of course," said Warikugi humorously. "Yet not beyond the range of all conception, is it, Captain? Do you mean that your fear of being made a fool of by some boy would be greater than your natural curiosity, and that you would be too proud to stop and pick it up on your way back to your ship?"

"Not necessarily," said Rob Earnshaw thickly. "I guess we've all got some of the fish in us, when you get down to it."

"You whites are very bull-headed," said Warikugi with gentle pity. "You argue what you do not believe, and deny that which you do. Much different from simple and forthright Japanese. I also may consider doubtfully, but not less with hope, that it prove to be that far-drawn possibility, a message from Captain Roger Earnshaw of the Clippers. A thousand miles away and five miles deep. Perhaps, yes, possible?"

He paused a moment. And what cogitations were going on behind that bland mustached smile, back of those slant eyes with their shrewd wrinkled look, within that subtle Oriental brain, was not for Rob Earnshaw to guess, much less comment on. Earnshaw leaned upon the rail with his fists clasped together, and the sweat upon his skin.

"We Japanese also have our pride, but it is humble," said Warikugi, after a moment of reflection, gently still, with humor. "It is so great, it is so humble, that it does not mind being laughed at by boys. My monkey curiosity has been aroused. Suppose we see what it says in it, Captain?"

He clapped his hands together, without waiting for an answer from Rob Earnshaw. He crackled words of Japanese.

A squat muscular quartermaster mate came running aft.

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He snapped his heels together and saluted the captain of the *Ashewashi*. He cast a glance outward at the floating bottle as Warikugi crackled, and saluted again, with an enigmatic, inscrutable look on his broad brown pock-marked face. He removed his cap and laid it on the deck within the scupper, and pulled off his shoes from his broad-toed feet. He climbed over the rail, and paused an instant, then dived cleanly down into the water.

He went toward the squat brown bottle drifting in the running tide with short quick choppy motions of his arms, smooth and precise. He caught hold of it. He grinned, holding it up from the surface, treading water, and then, with a longer, lazier stroke, came swimming back against the tide with it, making for the *Ashewashi's* landing stage.

"Hideyoshi," said Warikugi. "Very good swimmer. Olympic champion. We will see what's in it, captain, and resolve all gnawing doubts."

"Yes," agreed Rob Earnshaw, expelling his breath with a sigh.

IV

THE swimming Jap had reached the *Ashewashi's* gangway ladder, where the *Wenderley's* launch lay tied. Peedy, the coxswain of the launch, extended a hand to help him, if he needed it. He avoided the proffered aid, however. He drew himself up on the landing stage, still clutching the bottle, and got to his feet and came up the ladder like a wet white seal. He came trotting aft toward the quarterdeck, extending the bottle to Warikugi with a crackled word and a salute.

"Do you mind?" said Warikugi, smiling at Earnshaw.

Rob Earnshaw had turned from the rail. His back was braced against it. The sweat was on his face and palms. Paddy Malone had turned dizzily, too.

Warikugi pulled the wet cork out of the bottle, smiling. He inserted an index finger, and extracted the rolled bit of paper which clung around the inside of the squat brown bottle's neck. It was a leaf torn from a common notebook.

He glanced down at it, still smiling.

There was a great brown spot spread over the paper. *2 Chinese really Japs*, said the faint wavering pencil marks upon the paper. *Shot marine officers in back, Radio-man Albert, Co-pilot Wallace, me. Clubbed others. Jap destroyer below. Taken controls & heading down for it. Have started heaving over dead men in air. One Jap's name Warikugi from conversation, grinning yellow face. Writing with left hand beneath me. Think I am dead. In God's name Earnshaw Oahu Clipper 2250 naut. miles W. Hawaii Hr. 13:05 Manila 12 May—*

The captain of the *Ashewashi* read through it quickly, to those last words, more scrawled and vaguer. He read through it with the beaming smile upon his face.

Rob Earnshaw stood with his back against the rail, his head a little swaying. He saw Warikugi's unchanged, unceasing smile. He lifted an arm, he put forth a hand slowly, with deep lines about his mouth and a questioning look upon his sweating face.

"May I see it?" he said.

The sunlight seemed to have gone. There was a darkness. A darkness beneath the awning, and beyond. No sunlight on the water, but gray waves running. The darkness of the mucky shore. The shadow of the *Ashewashi* lay over the water.

It lay over the shallow shoreward ocean here. It lay over the vast waters of the Pacific. It was in the dark faces of the two lean dark subordinate officers of the *Ashewashi*, in the dark pockmarked face of the burly dripping little Jap quartermaster still standing alertly at attention.

They are armed, of course, thought Rob Earnshaw. The dark two-striper and the striper-and-a-half have naval daggers on them, underneath their spruce white tunics. The quartermaster is an athlete, muscular and quick, probably proficient in *judo*.

There is the officer of the deck in sight with belted pistol, and all the armed guards.

There are only Paddy and me, and the crew of the launch at the side, and Paddy is too drunk to see, and the boys in the launch are unarmed and out of reach, and I am alone here, upon her quarterdeck, beneath the banner of the Rising Sun. And if it should come to a case of guns, there is only the poor old *Wanderley* with her old three-inchers, throwing fourteen pounds, against this big swift crack flotilla leader with her five-inch rifles.

I am here upon her quarterdeck, beneath the Rising Sun. . . . He held out his hand slowly, easily. But the muscles of his arms were knotted, and his fingers stiffened to make a fist, and there was a sweat upon his face.

"May I see it?" he repeated.

Perhaps the first time he had not said it quite aloud.

In all that darkness there was only the beam of Warikugi's unchanging face.

"It is Japanese," said Warikugi, beaming. "Joke of some boy. Certainly look at it, captain, if you care to, though I am afraid you cannot read it."

He held it out as Rob Earnshaw moved forward a slow step, reaching for it.

"Oh!" he said. "So sorry!"

HE SEEMED to bend forward a little to extend it to Rob Earnshaw. And as he did, to stumble. Earnshaw could not have said a hand was laid upon him. Perhaps the drink still numbed and clogged his feet. But his knees buckled beneath him and he stumbled forward, half sprawling, and his extended arm felt wrenched out of its socket. He staggered, catching his foothold, straightening up, and swung around with white tight lips and doubled fists held stiffly at his sides.

Warikugi was at the rail, and peering over. "Oh!" he said. "So sad. So sorry. I stumble. Japanese navy has been dishonored. Too much drink. It float out of my hand and blow overside. But Hideyoshi will get it.

"Crack-crack-crack!" he crackled to the wet white burly little quartermaster, as the latter climbed over the rail again and dropped overside.

There was a lump in Earnshaw's throat, too big to swallow. He held his fists tight at his sides. He turned to the rail and looked down into the water.

The burly pockmarked little Japanese quartermaster had dropped feet first, straight down upon the floating paper, plunging below the surface. He came up in a boil of water, clutching for the sodden paper as it swirled. He got hold of a corner of it, splashing, and then seemed to lose it in the lather. He went down again below the surface, bubbling and gasping, the Olympic swimmer, and came up again with a fragment of it in his fist, and again lost it in the smother, clutching for it valiantly.

Rob Earnshaw watched with tight lips. There was nothing to say or do. It was only a gray disintegrated rag now, separated into a dozen pieces, mingled with the

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papers and sewage drifting from the ship's head, and there was nothing left of it to read. The little brown-faced man came up, shaking his grinning head.

"So sad, so sorry," said Warikugi, beaming. "He say all lost. Too bad. Very funny Japanese joke. Boy pretend he admiral British battlecruiser Hood, sunk off Iceland, write farewell message to his wife and kids and put in bottle as he blows up. Very heart-breaking if you believe it, only he write it in Japanese. Now by stumbling carelessness it lost. Japanese navy has been dishonored. Shall we have a farewell drink before you go?"

"To your Emperor, sir," said Rob Earnshaw courteously.

THE FACE of the little Jap commander became blank and peaceful, doll-like. His two dark-faced aides lifted their glasses and drank with him. Rob Earnshaw lifted his glass also, and drank, for he belonged in the Navy and had the honor of the Navy on his shoulders, though he wanted to hurl the glass at that beaming yellow face.

And he shook hands with the two dark-faced *Ashewashi* officers before he went, though he never knew their names, and he shook hands with Warikugi, too. Though that shake would need washing.

The *Wanderley's* little launch *put-putted* down along the shadow of the *Ashewashi's* long lean gray strakes, while Paddy Malone sat with his head in his hands beside Rob Earnshaw in the stern.

As they went past the Jap flotilla leader's quarter, from the rail above brown faces were peering down, filled with a sibilant watchful scrutiny, with a bubbling repressed laughter over the eternal comicalness of whites.

Rob Earnshaw fumbled for a cigarette. He watched idly a squat brown bottle floating among the mangrove roots along the shore. It was a bottle without a label, but there was a cork in it, and the glass around the neck of it had an amber glint, as if inside it there was something white.

"They tried to get us drunk," said Paddy Malone.

"Not to get us drunk, but to show us they could outdrink us, sailor," said Rob Earnshaw. "It is one of their many minor vanities. If I don't smell a shot of booze for the next twenty years myself, I'll still have had enough. But I hope I held my own, and made them gallop. Don't feel too low about it, Paddy. You did beautifully. You reached the rail at just the right time. It was probably the vilest liquor ever poured into human stomachs, and besides, I mixed the drinks."

"The rum you had to drink at first was good stuff, anyway," said Paddy Malone. "If any of it is ever good. I guess that was why you were able to hold out."

"Hell," said Rob Earnshaw, "it was the same raw vile Hongkew liquor, with a little more alcohol and some molasses, that was all. It was putrid and stank to heaven. If Warikugi had been a rum drinker, he would have known that Old Eagle New England rum, with the eagle stamped on the bottle's shoulder, is the common brand of imitation American rum distributed in Shanghai. Every one you see holds Hongkew rot gut."

"But that bottle," said Paddy Malone weakly, "that bottle that floated out from underneath the old pier, it must have held real liquor once; it must have been authentic. How do you know where it came from, just because he said it was a Japanese message in it? It might have come from America."

"There is no authentic Old Eagle Rum, son," said Rob Earnshaw. "There is no such brand made in America. That is what I am trying to tell you."

"But you said your brother—"

"Use your head," said Rob Earnshaw gravely, quietly. "Do you think that a clipper captain would go on board his ship drunk, carrying a bottle with him?"

"I don't get it," said Paddy Malone. "It's the headache that I have, I guess, skipper. But why be so polite to them, and tell them that it was grand liquor, and that your uncle owned the distillery and you had been brought up on it, and why lie about your brother—excuse me, sir—but why do that, and say that he was drunk, when you knew he wasn't? Why, they might even have had something to do with his death. They had such a sly way of looking. That grinning yellow so-and-so kept coming back to the subject, as if he was trying to find out if you knew anything, when he had got you drunk enough. He was laughing at you all the time up his sleeve, I almost think, when he kept saying how he admired your brother."

"Was he?" said Earnshaw, with the deep lines about his mouth.

"Yes, sir, I'm sure he was. Now that I think back on it. Why, I'd like to go back there now and smash in his grinning yellow face! He did know something! He wondered if you might guess. Only he was so damned sure you couldn't prove it. That there was no way you could ever really know. Why, he was laughing at you, sir, laughing up his sleeve. I wasn't so drunk but that I felt it.

"And that message in the bottle, he told you it was Japanese. But I got a glimpse of it when it was floating on the water, before that pock-marked quartermaster dived in and washed it under, and it wasn't in Japanese characters. It was written in script, some European language, and it might have been English, for all I know."

Earnshaw unbuttoned his left breast pocket and pulled out a sheet of paper.

"Do you want to read a copy of it?" he said tiredly.

V

PADDY MALONE took the sheet from him, with wondering eyes. It was written on a letterhead of the *Wanderley*, in Rob Earnshaw's own big scrawled writing.

"Two of the Chinese passengers were really Japs," it read, with some of the words crossed out. "They suddenly pulled guns and began shooting. They shot the two marine officers in the back—"

And on down through the rest of it, a little more elaborate and detailed than the message which Commander Warikugi had pulled from the bottle, but with the excess words crossed out, so that it trimmed down to the same. Paddy Malone read it through three times, with whispering lips.

"I sweated over it," Rob Earnshaw said. "I had to pare it down to what a dying man might write, lying on the floorboards of his cockpit beneath his wheel, shot through the back and believed to be already dead. He would have to write without perceptible motion. With his hand hidden beneath him. He would try to think of the important things to say. He would not be able to write clearly. He would not get them all.

"I practiced lying on my face in that position. I tried to go through all that Hell in my own mind. But a man has got to be dying, I guess, to know just what it's like.

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What you have there is only a rough draft, of course. But the finished product in the bottle seemed to work out all right."

Paddy Malone handed it back, his eyes large and round, wetting his lips.

"You planted it last night?" he said. "I remember you took the dory out after we came in. I thought it was just for exercise. But you crept up the coast that near them, and planted it? Of course. Of course.

"You called my attention to it, didn't you, while they were watching and listening to us from the rail above. You brought in how you and your brother had put messages in bottles like that when you were boys. I thought you were being a little dull and garrulous, sir, if you'll excuse me. But you did it for a purpose. You had watched the tides, of course, and had figured out at about what hour it would float out. I see now, sir. But how did you know the things that you put in it?"

"The Department has always known that the *Ashewashi* was in the vicinity where Rog's ship last reported," said Rob Earnshaw grimly, "although the Japs made no mention of it, as they did of other ships of theirs farther away, which they sent to the scene to help the search diligently.

"The Department has also had good reason to believe that Warikugi was one of the two presumed Chinese merchants who were passengers on the Clipper, although it has been merely a matter of strong conjecture and hypothesis, and absolutely unprovable. He is a very brilliant man, one of the most brilliant and daring of their Intelligence.

"The other Jap with him was doubtless a flying man, perhaps that same dark two-striper with the wings on board the *Ashewashi,* whose job it was to take the wheel and bring her down to the *Ashewashi's* side after Rog and his co-pilot and the radio man had been blasted out.

"There was that much known, but it was unprovable. My older brother Bill, the captain, is chief of the Bureau, don't forget. He gave me *carte blanche* to handle it, so long as I didn't bring the Navy into it.

"I've been following him a long time to meet up with him," he said tiredly. "A long, long time. A long, long play. Last year I almost got him at Tonking, but the *Ashewashi* weighed the night before we steamed in. It might have been Smoy or Swatow, Daigon or Surabaya. But I always just missed.

"Didn't you suspect that the fouled screw which suddenly developed yesterday and which brought us limping in last night was something cooked up between me and the engineer officer? It was planned from the beginning. Every detail. It seemed to work out all right."

HE LIT a cigarette and blew smoke with a long exhalation, watching the shore and water with his shrewd wrinkled eyes.

"You see, I was pretty sure he would have a bottle of Old Eagle in his drinking supplies, since any good cellar should have American rum, and it would be the only type available. Yet it is not a drink that he would know particularly, since it isn't a yellow man's drink, but a white's. He might have had that same bottle for a year or more, just as dressing, along with the *saki* and the vodka and the few other special drinks.

"He couldn't have any reason to disbelieve me when I spoke of its rarity. If it had been any of the other drinks which had had a particular kind of identifiable bottle, and not the rum, that would have been the drink I loved to drink and the kind of drink that Rog had carried on the clipper with him—and the kind of bottle that would have come floating on the tide.

"I'm tired, son," he said. "I'm damned tired. I sweated off enough to float the *Kansas.* I had my first bad jolt just as we got to her ladder, when it looked as if the bottle might be going to float out into sight before I had had time to plant it in his mind that that type of bottle was a rare one, and to have him identify it, when he saw it, with my brother.

"I had a worse moment when I wangled him to the rail and we were looking out at it floating, while he was figuring in his brain whether or not it might possibly have come from Rog. Figuring whether Rog had actually died instantly, or might have survived long enough to write a message.

"If he had been sure, of course, he would not have bothered. But he sent his man to get it, before I might pick it up myself on our homeward way—and I knew then that he wasn't quite certain, that he was a little alarmed.

"But the great big sweat of all," he said with a tired grin, "the great big strain, was after he had read it, and I held out my hand and asked him to give it to me. Suppose he had handed it over, and said what a great big joke, ha, ha. That would have finished it."

"What happens now?" said Paddy Malone.

"HE WILL find other bottles," said Earnshaw grimly. "With the same message in them. I had fifty empties on board ship in my cabin. I eased a couple of them offside while we were on our way this afternoon. There's one there now, among the mangrove roots. He'll find Old Eagles floating past his bows and beneath his stern. He'll find them against his anchor cables and at his landing stage. He'll find them in his bath and in his soup. And when I run out of Old Eagles, he'll find whatever are available in the line of ketchup and soda pop. He'll find them by the dozens."

"I'd like to see his face when he does, sir. I'd like to see him laugh on the other side of it."

"You'll never see that about a Jap," said Rob Earnshaw. "When they laugh on the other side of their faces they do it alone, and in silence. With a knife through their insides."

"Ah!" said Paddy. "He will, will he?"

"When the bottles begin to drift in flocks," said Rob Earnshaw grimly. "Kneeling on his quarterdeck in his ceremonial robe. Tonight. Tonight."

"I understand how the Department could know about the *Ashewashi* having been in the vicinity, not reporting herself," said Paddy Malone after a while, "and I can understand how they could know that Warikugi had been the man who had done it, too. But how could you know the details of what had happened in the air, sir—who was shot and who was clubbed to death, and how they began to heave the dead men overboard before they had landed?"

"Do you think a twin wouldn't know?" Rob Earnshaw said. "What happened, and what he knew and felt while he lay dying. And afterward. And afterward. Ah, damn them!"

But the bitterness of his words held a note of victory, too.

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Boss Pembroke turned livid and began to pace the floor, with Omega keeping step at his side. Fowler was scared, but Nelson sat tight

Minions of the Shadow

By William Gray Beyer

Big Chief Omega (the demon shadow) may not be much good at cleaning up politics, but he can certainly make 'em livelier. Step right in here and see how history is revised while you wait

AFTER a tolerably busy fifteen years, MARK NEVINS feels an itch to pay a flying visit to twentieth-century America and visit a few old friends.

And why not? Since waking up—six thousand years after going under that confounded anesthetic—he has married the girl Nona and had two kids; he's almost civilized the modern Vikings, and freed the Land of the Brish, and come back to benighted America to make a pretty nice place of the modern city of Detroit.

He's earned the trip, all right.

OMEGA, of course, is the stumbling-block—as usual. Omega, the Moon Man with the streamlined brain that can slide in or out of any body—man, bird, beast, or fowl—or just stand around with no body at all. Omega, with a sense of humor which would tempt a fairly patient man to throttle his own grandmother.. Omega, who has taught Mark and tormented him; who alone is able to take him back to the past.

Frankly, Omega doesn't want to go; he's quite pettish about the whole thing. He's afraid he'll merge with some body back there and get stuck—which would mean the thoroughly dull business of living six thousand years all over again. But Mark is quietly persistent; and Omega finally gives in, saying, "You'll wish you hadn't. . ."

And is he right!

Disembodied, but perfectly able to communicate with each other, the two land in Mark's home town at just about the time Mark went under the anesthetic. And they land right in the middle of a murder scene: a very beautiful woman indeed, lying on the floor with her throat cut.

HARVEY NELSON, an old friend whom Mark had come back particularly to see, has been going with the woman for several years. He is suspected of the murder; and Mark persuades Omega to stick around and see what they can do for him.

THIS NELSON seems to be in a tough spot at that. Being one of those occasional curiosities who are so honest that they trust everybody else, he makes a perfect fall guy for the corrupt politicians of his city.

This story began in last week's Argosy

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He's a ward leader and a county commissioner; and the graft that doesn't get shoved through his unsuspecting fingers isn't worth the shoving.

Trouble is, he has a touching faith in his old friend FOWLER, whose job is to keep him in line for the big boss, PEMBROKE. And keeping Nelson in line is very important right now, because he has to deliver his ward for DANVERS, Pembroke's candidate in the approaching primaries.

It is at this point that Omega steps into the picture and begins to have what he calls fun. He plays corny but unsettling practical jokes on Nelson's friends; then —being disembodied—leaves Nelson to take the blame. And he talks to Nelson, using the man's own voice.

At first Nelson thinks he is ready for the silly-shack; but at length he comes to understand that Omega is his shadow. When Omega finally convinces him that he is a sucker for the boys on the gravy train, Nelson confronts Fowler with the shocking facts. And Omega, having read Fowler's mind, informs Nelson that the heeler is going to burn the incriminating records.

Ignoring Mark's protest, Omega forestalls precipitate action by Nelson; slams him back into his chair, and says, "Get on your coat; I want to have some fun out of your life. . . ."

CHAPTER VI

HERE GOES HARVEY!

HARVEY got groggily to his feet. His breath was coming in short gasps, occasioned by a partial paralysis in the region of the solar plexus. And his brain was not functioning any too well. It had come as a shock that his shadow could exert such force, and especially that it could be directed against himself.

"I'm tough stuff," gloated the voice. "And listen: when we get outside, don't talk to me out loud. If you want to say anything to me, just think it. Call me Omega when you want to think anything at me. Then I'm sure to pay attention."

Out on the street Harvey found himself directed around to the garage, where he kept his car.

"We're calling on your girl friend," Omega announced. "Nice girl, by the way. Though for the life of me I can't understand what she sees in you."

Harvey steered the car out of the garage, then suddenly shot down the street in second gear, rapidly accelerating. He was doing forty before he shifted into high. This wasn't Harvey's way of driving at all. He had always been a cautious driver.

But Harvey Nelson was a hard man to lick. And Omega couldn't drive a car and concentrate on Harvey's thoughts at the same time. It was possible, therefore, for Harvey to snatch a hand from the gear-shift lever and turn off the ignition.

Then he placed the hand on the steering wheel and strove mightily to bring the car to a safe stop. He succeeded, too, and learned a new fact about his shadow's powers. Omega could overpower him only so long as he operated unexpectedly. When it came to a slow tug-of-war test of strength, Harvey was the stronger. Omega maintained a sullen silence as Harvey started the car again and drove on at his usual discreet pace.

The sedan pulled up in front of an imposing apartment house and parked. Nelson suddenly began to have misgivings. This Omega person was obviously given to pranks of a most practical nature. And Harvey was always very decorous in the presence of the opposite sex. Especially Millicent.

"Don't worry," came the voice in his ear. "I won't do anything she won't like."

Omega accompanied this assertion with a suggestive wallop in the small of the back; and Nelson's wind went out with a blast which almost bulged the windshield. He panted a little and felt gingery at the bruised portion of his ribs. But in spite of a throbbing in that region he felt reassured. Omega never told a lie, and it was altogether possible that he possessed enough personal honor to keep his promise. Harvey climbed from the car and entered the apartment house.

Omega had said that he wouldn't do anything Milicent wouldn't like. Now if he only stuck to that . . . Harvey entered the elevator cage before he thought of something which caused his misgivings to return.

"Omega!" he thought, as the cage began to rise. "Just what sort of thing do you suppose she likes?"

"Quiet," hissed Omega. "I know my women."

"How?"

"Easy. In the past week you've been around plenty of women. Whenever the light cast me on them, I could read their thoughts.

You know—though I find no good reason for it—they all seem to admire you. Your tall, stalwart figure; that shock of sandy hair; those rugged, honest features, and especially those baby blue eyes. Son, if you weren't such a dope you could be cutting yourself in for plenty. . ."

TWENTY-twenty was the number on Millicent's door. Harvey rapped apologetically with his knuckles. At least he started to, but when the knuckles struck, they hit with resounding force.

"Don't be so damned timid," rasped Omega. "Women like their men to be masterful. Go in there like you knew you were welcome. Don't vacillate. Tell her you're going to take her out and hit the hot spots. I want fun!"

The voice chortled.

After a moment the door opened. Milicent, apparently on the point of retiring, was clad sketchily in a negligee which evidently hadn't been designed for warmth. Her face revealed her pleased surprise at the sight of Harvey, while the negligee revealed contours which shouldn't have been concealed anyway.

Harvey, about to open his mouth and apologize for his unexpected call, suddenly felt himself catapulted across the threshold.

His arms, extended to catch himself, encircled her slim figure. She looked up into his eyes and tilted her face at the proper angle. Harvey kissed her. Long and lingerly. The sensation wasn't at all disagreeable. But after a few seconds he evidently realized that this was anything but decorous behavior, and abruptly terminated the osculation. He stood, tongue-tied, while Milicent heaved a deep sigh.

"Why Harvey!" she finally exclaimed, after finding enough breath to do so.

"All you need now is bow, arrows, and diaper."

"Aw, the guy needed a push. He wasn't having any fun. Too busy thinking about the proprieties and such. Before I'm through he'll know the facts of life."

"Could be . . . But two will get you five that Harvey Nelson teaches you something about sales resistance."

Harvey turned a deep crimson. He fortunately caught himself on the point of lamely explaining that he'd tripped. That would never do now.

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Millicent disengaged herself after a minute and sat weakly down on a divan. She stared quizically at Harvey, who appeared about to sit beside her. But Mr. Nelson remembered something at that moment. Omega wouldn't make a good third on a divan. Harvey didn't trust him.

"Milly," he said, hesitantly. "Let's go out . . . Celebrate —or something."

Milly didn't need any coaxing. She left the room with the promise that it would take only a minute to put on her glamour.

Omega decided to intervene. "I've changed my mind," he said. "We'll stay."

"No we won't," Harvey muttered. "I've decided to go out now."

After a moment of silence Omega said: "All right. The night's young. We go out, but don't get any funny ideas about who's boss." A light dig in the ribs, accompanied by a wrenching twist of the nose, emphasized the words.

Harvey was about to try a little experiment with the lights when Millicent appeared, radiantly beautiful, and apparently as happy as she could be. She smiled at him as if they shared a delightful secret. He couldn't imagine what it was, but being a bit delirious himself, helped her on with her coat, and kissed her again before opening the door.

The sedan was about to pull away from the curb when abruptly the night was shattered by the raucous wail of a fire siren. It was followed roaringly by two red trucks, one containing sundry ladders, hooks and half-dressed men, and the other heavy with pumping equipment and hoses.

Harvey followed just as speedily with the sedan. Millicent raised a hand to stifle a scream as he cut around a corner in their wake, narrowly missing several cars.

And Harvey himself was doing the driving this time. Omega had nothing to do with it. He merely chuckled eerily in Harvey's ear, and murmured: "Doubt my word, would you? There goes the evidence—up in smoke!"

CHAPTER VII

BOSS OF THE DOUBLE CROSS

AS HARVEY had feared, the fire engines stopped at one of the corner entrances to the City Hall. Men armed with portable fire-extinguishers and axes boiled through the entrance. With a scream of tires he brought the sedan to a stop beside them.

Harvey Nelson was suddenly undecided as to the next move. He knew who was behind that fire, though it wouldn't do any good to say so. He'd have to prove it, and he wasn't so sure that he wanted to. Warily, he headed the sedan away from the fire-fighting equipment. He was still in a fog of mental indecision as he absently noticed a sign "Club Patelli" and pulled in to the curb.

Two tipsy revelers, who had been about to leave the place, stopped abruptly. Harvey's topper had raised straight in the air and then sailed toward the hat check girl's window. The tipsy two applauded noisily. Neither noticed the expression of bewilderment on Harvey's face when the hat lifted from his head.

"Thassa dandy trick," complimented one of the revelers. "Show me how you do it?"

The hat obediently sailed out of the hat check girl's hand—which happened to be directly in Harvey's shadow —and returned to his head.

"You just raise your left eyebrow," Harvey explained. "Like this!"

The hat repeated its performance, going slowly and unerringly to the girl's hands.

"S'wonderful," said the stew, blinking furiously. "Gimme my hat, gorgeous."

Harvey and Millicent followed the headwaiter to a choice table by the dance floor. A bill of fairish denomination accounted for this. Harvey had decided to make the best of things, even if he went broke in the process.

Millicent leaned confidentially over a small table, after a waiter had disappeared with their order. "How'd you do it, Harvey?" she coaxed.

"That hat trick?" Nelson breathed deeply, inhaling a heady fragrance which must have been caused by perfume doused in her hair.

"I didn't do it," he said, weakly. "I'm haunted."

"Sissy!" Omega remarked, quietly.

"Nonsense," she said, amiably.

Harvey, already in a mental turmoil, was spared the necessity of elaborating. For at that moment Fowler appeared, waddling precariously between the close-set tables. There was an urgent light in his eyes as he spotted Nelson.

"Boy!" he puffed. "Am I glad to see you! Been calling all over town. Something terrible's happened! Everything in the office is burned up. We'll have to round everybody up and get to work on a new budget estimate. There's no use trying to dig into the old one and see who's been pulling the wool over our eyes. All the records are destroyed."

Harvey looked at him sadly as he puffed to a stop. Somehow he didn't have the heart to be mad at the man. Fowler had helped him over many a tough spot; and now, in spite of his proven perfidy, Harvey found himself trying to excuse the attempt at self-preservation.

He smiled disarmingly. "That's a tough break," he said. "You'll have to get to work on another. Make sure this is a straight one. I'll help you with it myself. We won't have any dummies this time."

Fowler straightened. His face adequately revealed his injured feeling. "Why boy," he said. "You don't think that an estimate of mine would be other than—"

Harvey waved a hand. "Of *course* not," he interrupted. "But I'll feel better if I check everything. See you at the office."

Fowler nodded unhappily and turned to leave. At that moment he felt the sudden contact of a shoe, speeding his departure in a very undignified manner. But he didn't look back, remembering the peculiarities he had already observed in his protégé.

FOWLER didn't let any grass grow under his feet. He left the night club and took a taxi directly to the home of one Felix Pembroke, the real brains of the Party. Pembroke got out of bed to receive him. Fowler babbled forth the events of the evening.

"You incompetent fool," said Pembroke finally. "He must suspect you had that fire set. You're the dumbest man I ever saw when it comes to covering your tracks."

"Some of your own tracks aren't covered so well," Fowler reminded him. "And that'll put us in a nice spot if we don't get our man in at the primaries."

Pembroke nodded grimly. "And I suppose Nelson will do the opposite of anything you suggest, from now on?"

"That's what I'm afraid of," said Fowler. "At the very

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least he'll check up on me. I was going to suggest that we put up a candidate who'll stand some investigating. Then we'll be fairly safe. Nelson won't turn from the Party. But he might support the reform candidate at the primaries. And if we have a man who can stand an investigation, we can trump up some stuff on the reform man, and he'll pick our man to support. How about it?"

Pembroke laughed mirthlessly. "Who?" he asked, sarcastically.

Fowler was stumped. He thought the matter over for several minutes. But every time he seemed on the verge of deciding on some prominent leader, he either remembered some shady episode which might be uncovered, or he realized that the man wouldn't appeal to the public. Either drawback might well be fatal.

Pembroke finally broke the silence. "Your plan's no good," he said. "We'll have to stick to Danvers. He can beat the reform man with the help of Nelson's ward. Mr. Nelson will have to toe the line, or else!

"In fact, maybe it would better if Mr. Nelson became temporarily indisposed. *You* might be able to swing his ward, if you work hard enough. . . . Sure! That's the solution! You've always relayed his orders anyway. We can do without his speeches, as long as the committeemen think he's still directing things up at the fifty-second ward. I'll get in touch with Bonzetti right away!"

Fowler paled. "No, no," he exclaimed. "Not Bonzetti! After all, the lad's been like a son to me. Give me a chance to win him over."

Pembroke shook his head. "Fool!" he said. "My way is the best. Not only will it insure the election, but you can put through your original estimate for your department. Any other way you lose your gravy."

It was to Fowler's credit that he didn't hesitate. "That don't mean anything," he said. "I got plenty. Try my way first. I'll win him over. Give me a chance."

Pembroke appeared to think the request over very carefully. "All right," he finally agreed. "I'll give you a week. But remember this: If you fail, Bonzetti pulls his snatch, and you take over. And don't think you can buck me, either. A twenty-year stretch wouldn't do you much good."

Fowler left the house with his brain ticking over at a furious rate. He didn't like the crafty look he'd seen in Pembroke's eyes. It would be just like him to string him along and then send Bonzetti out to snatch Nelson anyway. The boss had a reputation for refusing to play fair with anyone—unless playing fair happened to be to his advantage.

Fowler got in the taxi, but sat still for a minute before naming a destination.

Suddenly he jumped out and mounted the terrace at the side of Pembroke's house. He padded softly to the French windows of the room he had just quitted. Then he scurried back to the taxi and ordered speed, back to the club where he'd come from. The cab started out with a jolt which set his jowls to quivering madly.

Pembroke had been earnestly talking to someone over the phone when he had looked in the windows. That could mean only one thing. The boss was living up to his reputation. He had only pretended to give Fowler a chance to win Nelson over, so that he wouldn't go immediately to warn him.

And unless Fowler moved quickly Bonzetti would descend upon Harvey Nelson like a particularly malevolent ton of bricks.

CHAPTER VIII

HARVEY'S NECK IS OUT

HARVEY NELSON had another visitor at his table, almost as soon as Fowler left. A stocky man, homely, and friendly as a puppy.

"I'm Joe Patelli," he announced, grinned broadly. "I run this place. Mind if I pull up a chair for a second, Mr. Nelson?"

Harvey felt a vague sense of familiarity as he looked at the newcomer, but it didn't quite congeal into actual recognition. Joe Patelli, therefore, must be a constituent and worthy of his attention for that reason alone. Harvey felt a sense of duty toward constituents: one of the many things which set him apart as a politician. He nodded and smiled.

"This is Miss Forbes, my fiancee," he said.

Millicent raised a quizical eyebrow, but said nothing. She was slightly stunned at the abruptness of it, and could only muster a smile as Patelli made a gallant remark about Harvey's taste.

"I'm in your ward, Mr. Nelson," he added, abruptly. "Do you mind telling me who we're going to put in, this election?"

Harvey's eyes narrowed momentarily. "It's a little early yet," he said. "Why?"

"Well," Patelli said slowly. "I got a chance to open a place in the suburbs. If I thought the reform crowd was goin' to get a hold in town, I'd do it. With the city closed tighter than a drum, a place just out of town would be a gold mine. On the other hand, it would be a waste of money if Danvers got the election. I can't run two places."

Harvey nodded. "You figure the reform crowd would be bad business, eh?"

"No doubt of it. They'd have the blue laws working in no time. You know that. Pembroke couldn't tell them what to do. It would be better if the opposition got in—meaning no offense. They'll at least play ball. But the reform crowd has got us all worried. They've almost got the Party split now. I figure it's all up to you."

"But the reform crowd wants to put a stop to vice and gambling," Millicent pointed out. "That's why they're getting so much support. People are getting tired of present conditions, according to the newspapers."

"According to the newspapers," jeered Patelli. "Lady, I'm in a position to know what I'm talking about, and that paper talk is a lot of malarkey. Right now the papers are short of news and they're making a whole lot of fuss about practically nothing, just to have something to print. As soon as somebody commits a nice, juicy murder, you won't read anything about gambling and vice."

Harvey said, "What do you mean by that?"

"Well, you know as well as me, Mr. Harvey, that there ain't any big-time gambling in town," Patelli said. "Pembroke's too greedy. As soon as an outfit begins to show a profit, he holds out his hand. They kick in for a while and then he raises the ante. First thing you know he takes all the profit out of it. And if they don't kick in, he closes them up.

"I ought to know. He drove me out of business when I had my joint. Glad he did, though. I'm making just as much here, and perfectly legitimate.

"This reform stuff is a lot of malarkey. Will it do any good to close me up? They can do it by shortening my

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business hours. That'll take away the profit. So what do I do? I open up again, just outside the city, and get the same trade anyway.

"Only I pay taxes to some thieving little borough on the edge of the town. That's going to help the city a lot, ain't it? Taxes will have to go up in other directions and more business leaves the town. It'll make a morgue out of this burg.

"It's nothin' to me, understand. I make money either way. I'd just like to know, so I could buy that place or turn it down."

HARVEY stared at Patelli for a long minute before he spoke. He was once more going through a phase of mental renovation. Fowler had always spoken in the highest terms of Mr. Pembroke: pictured him as being a man of the same lofty idealism as himself. According to Fowler he had been elected to leadership in the Party because of his unselfish devotion to the cause of bettering city government.

Harvey had never liked the man personally, but had blamed himself for the dislike. He had Fowler's word that he was of the finest character. And that had been enough. It was likely that if he didn't already know of the perfidy of Fowler, he would have called Patelli a liar on the spot.

But with the disturbing knowledge that nothing Fowler had ever told him was to be relied upon. . . . And added to that was the fact that Patelli was obviously concerned only with his own welfare, and making no attempt to influence him.

"I think you'd better stay here," said Harvey, thoughtfully.

"You're going to throw the nomination to Danvers?"

"Don't quote me," said Harvey. "I merely said you'll do better staying here. I guarantee that."

Patelli leaned back in his chair, a puzzled look on his face.

"I don't know what you mean," he finally said. "But whatever it is, it's okay with me. I'll turn down that offer. Thanks, Mr. Nelson."

Patelli left the table, his face wreathed in smiles.

"You're a regular politician," Millicent remarked. "You didn't tell him anything, and he's happy. What *are* you going to do?"

"I don't know," said Harvey miserably. "Let's get out of here. I've got to figure some things out. We'll take a ride in the park. All right?"

"Of course," agreed Millicent. "I'll help you figure. I'm your fiancée, you know. Though I think it's a heck of a way to propose. You didn't give me a chance to turn you down!"

Harvey's knees suddenly began to quake. "I thought—" he stammered. "After all—"

"Yes, I know," said Millicent, quietly. "You kissed me, and I didn't sock you. So that proves something, doesn't it?"

"Doesn't it?" he asked, vaguely.

"Yes, dear," she replied. "It does."

OMEGA showed no inclination to take charge as Harvey pulled away from the curb and headed toward the park. By the time they reached the river drive Harvey concluded that he must have fallen asleep, if shadows ever do sleep, and forgot about him.

"We made up our minds all of a sudden," he ventured, as Millicent showed no inclination to open a conversation.

"Uh huh," Millicent agreed, patting him on the knee. "Except that I made mine up about three years before you did."

"Huh? Oh, no you didn't," he contradicted. "I made up my mind the instant I first saw you. It just took three years for me to tell you about it."

"Darling!" cried Millicent, almost wrecking the car as she flung her arms around his neck. Then she suddenly sobered. "But that's not what you want to talk about. Danvers is a crook, isn't he?"

Harvey covered half a mile before answering. Then: "I'm afraid he is," he replied. "Otherwise Pembroke wouldn't want him. At the very least he's a man who will take the boss' orders. Which means graft in all the city departments, as well as the county ones."

"HARVEY! Don't tell me there's graft in *your* department!"

"It's lousy with it," affirmed Harvey.

Millicent clapped her hands. "Then we'll have a honeymoon in Bermuda," she said.

Harvey's mouth popped open. "What? Wait a minute! I had nothing to do with the graft. Fowler collected it for himself and the Party. All I ever got was my salary. And that's all I want!"

"Oh," said Millicent, in a small voice.

"He's a chump! said Omega, suddenly waking up, and speaking from the region of the windshield.

"What?" asked Millicent, absently adjusting herself to the idea of a graftless politician.

"He's a chump!" Omega repeated.

"He is not!" said Millicent, instantly jumping to the defense. "I think graft is horrible. . . . Who said that, Harvey?"

"My shadow," Harvey explained. "I told you I was haunted. He's been with me for hours."

"I've been with you all your life," Omega remarked severely, "And a very dull existence it's been," Millicent gave a short gasp and held a hand over her mouth to stifle a scream. Shadow apparently didn't notice her fright, for he continued without a break. "Milly, you'll find it hard to believe, but this guy don't even know what the inside of a boudoir looks like! Not only that but. . . ."

He rambled on for several minutes in the same vein, while Harvey scowled and kept his eyes glued to the road, and Millicent gradually got used to a voice speaking from thin air and settled down to listen interestedly.

". . . And right now he's harboring some silly notion of making a deal with the reform gang, in which they're to promise to confine their activities to actual law breakers, such as gamblers and vice dealers, and to leave harmless night clubs and Sunday sports alone. He thinks that the noble reformers will keep promises. What a man!"

"I THINK he's nice," retorted Millicent. "He's good inside, and that's why he thinks eveybody else is good. A person who suspects everybody else can't be very virtuous himself, or he wouldn't get such ideas. So there!"

"Virtue, phooey!" Omega exploded. "Who wants to be virtuous? What's it get you? Virtue is its own reward! It's got to be, says I. You can't have a good time on it. It cramps your style. Look at Horatio, here. He could be mayor by now, if he wasn't so damn virtuous. He's

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popular enough, but Pembroke knows he wouldn't stand for anything shady. So what is he? I ask you. What is he?"

Millicent looked at Harvey appraisingly. "What are you, darling?" she inquired.

"I'm a guy who's going to find some way of stepping on his shadow," Harvey growled. "He's getting to be a nuisance."

"Oh yeah?" exclaimed Omega with singular lack of originality.

Millicent, suddenly thinking of something, gave a short gasp. "I think he'll be worse than a nuisance," she told Harvey. "Especially after we're married."

Omega chuckled malevolently. "I'm staying," he said flatly. "I'm having lots of fun."

"*You* are," said Millicent. "But I'm not. Harvey! I just thought of something. . . . Why not try to put Pembroke out of business? Find some evidence of his crooked work, and force him to let you dictate Party policies. Then you can support Danvers and everything will be sweetness and light!"

Harvey looked thoughtful, while Omega emitted a disgusted snort.

"It's an idea," Harvey said. "I'd like to do something to make up for the years that I've been running a crooked department. It'll be cleaned up from now on, of course, but I'd be really doing the city a service if I could clean house in other departments. I think. . . ."

"How about Fowler?" asked Millicent. "He might know something you could hold over Pembroke's head. Or show you how to discover something."

Harvey was silent for several minutes. Then he slowed the car and reversed its direction.

"He might be able to help at that," he finally said. "Suppose we postpone the night's festivities until some other time. I'd like to go over some things in my files. . . ."

"What's all this got to do with preventing the murder? It looks more like things are leading toward a murder, rather than away from one. The way Harvey used to be, he'd never have suspected that anything was wrong with the city's management. Now he's all set to monkey with things better left alone."

"Tut, tut. You are always the one who's trying to reform things. Wouldn't you like to see the taxpayer get a square deal?"

"Sure, sure. But Harvey isn't the one to start a reform. Don't forget he was a friend of mine. Went to the same schools together. I don't like to see you pushing him toward a peck of trouble."

"Don't be silly. He was due to be involved in a murder before I interfered. Therefore, anything I've done tends to influence later events so that either the murder won't happen, or Harvey won't be involved. Q. E. D. Don't forget that creek."

"Sounds logical," Mark admitted. "But it looks to me as if he's stretching out his neck."

CHAPTER X

BIG CHIEF OMEGA

THE telephone was emitting a discordant jangle when Harvey let himself into his apartment. It had been ringing for some time, for he had heard it when he opened the door at the bottom of the stairs. He snatched it up now.

The voice at the other end was so excited that he didn't recognize it at first. After a minute it became coherent and he realized that it was Fowler, urging him to lock and barricade his door and wait until he arrived.

Harvey hung up, quite puzzled, but didn't bother to barricade the door. He did, however, turn out the lights and wait by the window. Nobody could enter the building without being seen from that vantage point.

Less than ten minutes passed when a taxi roared down the street and slid to a stop in front of the door. Fowler bounced out of the rear, stuffed bills into the driver's hand, and dashed for the door. Harvey let him in, whereupon he slumped in a chair to get his breath.

"What's the trouble?" Harvey asked. "You're puffing as if you'd ran over here, instead of riding."

Fowler's respiration slowly returned to normal. "Thank God I've found you, boy. I've been chasing all over town for you. You're in grave danger!"

Harvey listened attentively as Fowler told of his interview with Pembroke, and of seeing him telephoning. "He was calling Bonzetti, sure as you're born," Fowler finished. "And it won't end with just kidnaping. Bonzetti will have to protect himself by killing you and disposing of your body in such a way that it will never be found. You've got to be on guard every minute!"

Harvey was silent for several minutes. Fowler was obviously terrified—which meant that regardless of his petty thievery and deceit in the past, he was still Harvey's friend. Nelson's scale of values underwent another sudden revision. For Fowler wasn't a man of great physical courage; yet he had knowingly risked. . . .

"Jim," he said. "How would you like to be mayor?"

"Boy! You're delirious. Can't you understand that you're in danger? We've got to hire a bodyguard. One for me, too," he added.

"There isn't a single reason why you shouldn't be mayor. You've spent all your life in the service of this city. You've proven yourself to be a man of deep-seated integrity, and only interested in the public welfare. You've given unstintedly of your time. . . ."

Fowler's eyes were assuming a decided poppish aspect. "Cut it out, son," he said. "There's no use being sarcastic."

"I'm talking about what the voters know to be a fact," Harvey explained. "Who knows any different?"

FOWLER looked a bit sad. "Pembroke," he answered. "He knows enough to put me behind bars. Though of course I've put away enough money to pay for good lawyers. I might get out with a light sentence or maybe none at all. But that would leave me broke. And Pembroke would hand over the evidence, the minute he found I was bucking him. He may anyway, if he thinks I've spilled to you."

"Don't you have anything on him?"

"Same stuff he has on me," replied Fowler. "Graft; diversion of public funds, and all that. But he's got it on me in black and white. All I could do would be to holler, and he'd cover himself with his control of the courts. Don't forget he owns a newspaper, too. He'd whitewash himself thoroughly, saying that I was trying to get revenge with my wild accusations."

"He won't come out with that evidence," Harvey stated. "I've got something that'll stop him. And he can't whitewash himself with Uncle Sam. He's an accessory to kid-

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naping, and that's a federal offense, with a death penalty attached."

Fowler's eyes popped and he sputtered futilely. It was almost a minute before he could speak coherently. "Have you gone nuts?" he finally exploded. "You can't prove an accessory before the fact, when the fact hasn't happened!"

Harvey nodded. "Before and after," he stated. "Because that kidnaping is going to happen."

Fowler groaned as he saw the lines of Nelson's jaw harden, and saw what was in his mind. "Boy, boy," he wailed. "Don't do anything so foolish. Bonzetti isn't any amateur. He's thorough and efficient."

Harvey snorted. "A petty gangster," he pronounced. "I'll be ready for him. And when he kidnaps me, I'll get a confession out of him, naming Pembroke. We'll use that as a lever to elect you. Then we'll clean up the city departments until they shine."

"That's him, all right," Mark groaned. "Afraid of nothing and silly enough to buck any odds to uphold a principle. He hasn't changed a bit!"

Omega's mental voice was a bit dubious. "Hasn't changed. . . . Oh yes he has. He's suspicious now. He used to be gullible. That's bound to change things. They won't happen as they would have."

"Of course they won't! He'll get murdered himself, instead of just being suspected of one!"

"Aw, quite worrying. I won't let anything happen to him."

Fowler shook his head miserably. "It won't work," he said. "You'll never get away, once Bonzetti gets hold of you. He's dangerous, I tell you."

Nelson smiled confidently. "He never kidnaped me," he said. "Listen Jim. We'd better make sure that this really happens. As it stands now, it's merely guesswork, based on a phone call you didn't hear. Suppose we tell Pembroke we intend to run you on an independent ticket. Knowing that without the fifty-second ward he can't hope to elect Danvers, he's sure to put Bonzetti to work. That's it! Call for me about nine in the morning."

Fowler left, a scared and puzzled man. He couldn't reconcile this new Nelson with the man he had always been able to wrap around his finger with a smooth line of chatter. Now Harvey Nelson was taking the initiative, ordering *him* around!

LIGHT streamed through the window when Harvey awakened, and the angle indicated that the morning was well on its way. Harvey blinked and tried to get his thoughts into focus. He was looking at the ceiling while so occupied, and hence didn't notice for some minutes that he wasn't alone.

"I'm surprised at you," said a voice which he recognized immediately as being his own, which meant that it was Omega's. "Going out of your way to get us kidnaped."

"What do you mean?" Harvey began, then stopped in amazement. He had involuntarily faced the direction of the voice, and was shocked grievously as a result. For Omega seemed to have taken solid form!

Harvey looked for several seconds before he realized the truth of the situation. Omega was sitting on a chair, clad in a neat blue serge suit, fawn-colored gloves, gray socks and brown shoes. White shirt and a brown tie with yellow stripes—something Harvey had been given for Christmas—completed the outfit.

Aside from the clashing colors there was only one thing wrong with the picture—the face. The face, in fact the whole head, was that of a ferocious Indian of the old wild West!

Harvey stared at it for some time before he recognized it. Probably that was because the bronzed neck protruded from one of Harvey's own collars, and the feathered headdress had been broken off and the shaven scalp covered by his favorite derby; for Harvey had seen that face a thousand times. It had, in fact, stared at him inscrutably every day for the past ten years. The face belonged to a life-sized clay bust of an Indian brave, and had adorned his mantlepiece ever since he had taken this apartment.

Harvey realized that Omega's impalpable presence had merely occupied the assorted articles of clothing, holding them—and the outraged bust—in their proper positions. There was only one puzzling factor.

"How can you be over there?" he asked, looking behind him in the bed. "The light's casting you against the headboard."

"I've been practicing," said Omega cheerfully, getting up and walking back and forth. "I found that I'm also cast in a dozen directions by reflected ultra-violet rays. They're also light waves, you know, though quite invisible. It seems that I'm free to move about quite a bit, as long as I don't get too—*Oops!*"

The Indian's head suddenly fell through the suit of clothes and landed with a dull thud on the floor. This happened when Omega approached the opposite wall, some fifteen feet from Harvey. "—too far away," he continued. "I've been practicing walking for the last hour. Thought I'd better let you sleep."

As he talked, the clothes and the Indian head jerked themselves closer to the bed and laboriously rearranged themselves.

"Take it easy with that suit," Harvey cautioned. "It cost me fifty dollars. Say! I hope you don't intend to go around with me in that rig!"

"Why not? It's better than nothing," Omega claimed. "I felt naked before I thought this one up. Not bad, not bad."

A full-length mirror in a closet door claimed his attention. Tentatively he bulged the place where a chest belonged, but finding that it made unsightly wrinkles and threatened the upper vest buttons, he desisted and contented himself with assuming the shape of the garments—which wasn't bad, either.

"Say, I look just like you," Omega observed.

Harvey snorted and started for the bathroom. Omega nimbly followed as Harvey tried to close the door.

"Scram!" growled Harvey, trying vainly to push him outside. "A man's entitled to some privacy."

"I can't, and you're not," Omega said, amiably. "I'll wash your back."

CHAPTER X

SNATCHED TONIGHT, GONE TOMORROW

FOWLER appeared, panting and with quivering jowls, at the stroke of nine. He looked apprehensive at the sight of Omega, who was again posing before the mirror. He had never seen an Indian, leaning forward with his eyes shaded

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by a gloved hand, glaring at himself in a looking glass.

But then there were a lot of things Fowler had never seen, or even imagined. He had been trying vainly, for several hours, to see himself at the head of a clean city government. He couldn't, in fact, imagine a clean city government. There was no such animal; and if such a beast were created, it would die of its own nauseating virtue.

"Friend of mine," Harvey introduced. "Been a close associate for years. Mr. Omega—Mr. Fowler."

Fowler still looked puzzled, but rallied to the occasion. He stretched forth a hand and beamed. All three chins beamed with him. His expression became a bit sickly, however, as he felt the pressure of the gloved hand. Not a feature of the redoubtable Mr. Omega changed as he turned loose a guttural: "Ugh!"

It was more than an hour later, after Harvey and Fowler had consumed hearty breakfasts—only marred by the grim countenance of Omega, who refused to eat—when Harvey's sedan stopped before a large downtown building. On the way up in the elevator Harvey coached Fowler on the way he should talk. It was necessary that Pembroke think that with Nelson out of the way, he would still be able to manipulate the fifty-second ward's vote.

THERE was a girl in the outer office of Pembroke's private suite. Her duty was mainly to see that nobody without an appointment gained entrance to the inner sanctum. This duty she habitually performed with utmost efficiency.

Unfortunately, however, she had never had any experience with amorous Indians. Omega, when she had shown the austere side of her nature by demanding that they return later with an appointment, decided that she needed a bit of thawing. She took one look at his expressionless face and fled, leaving the door to Pembroke's office entirely unguarded.

Pembroke's first reaction to their sudden, unannounced entry was a frown, but he quickly changed it to an affable grin when he saw Nelson. "Well, well," he said. "Harvey Nelson! Don't often see you down here. How's everything up at the fifty-second?"

He stood up, very much at ease, and shook hands heartily with Harvey Nelson.

"Fine, Mr. Pembroke," said Harvey. "Things are lined up pretty well in my ward. That's what I came down here to talk about. We think it's about time we had a little say in the matter of candidates for a change."

Pembroke sobered instantly. He looked at Fowler, who fidgeted uncomfortably. "What's on your mind?" he finally asked.

Harvey spoke calmly.

"Just this: Fowler's a pretty popular man in my ward. I've decided he ought to be mayor. We'd like the support of the Party."

Pembroke's jaw dropped perceptibly. He fumbled for a pack of cigarettes which lay on his desk, and succeeded in placing two fingers in an open inkwell. He snorted in disgust at the damage to his formerly immaculate nails. It was a full minute before he got control of himself sufficiently to compose his face into its usual affable expression.

"Fowler's a good man," he pronounced. "But the Party leaders have already decided on Danvers. We've already started our newspaper buildup. It would be a little late to change now, without jeopardizing the nomination. The reform groups are pretty strong this year, you know.

"Suppose we just let things ride and put Fowler up next election. In the meantime, that is after this election is over, we can keep him in the public eye, so that he'll be better known when the time comes. You've got to go at these things gradually, you know."

Harvey heard him out, then shook his head vehemently. "I want Fowler nominated for *this* election. He'll carry my ward without any buildup. A little support from you, and we can put him in. If you don't agree, I'll run him on an independent ticket. I can elect him anyway, considering some of the things I know about Danvers."

Pembroke frowned again, and turned to inspect Omega to cover his own confusion. "Who's he?" he demanded.

"He represents the Indian vote," Harvey told him.

Omega raised his hand in what he conceived to be an Indian salute, but Pembroke was not impressed.

"Nonsense! There isn't a single Indian on the registration lists. What do you think about this, Fowler?"

Fowler fidgeted some more. He scraped his feet on the thick rug, and looked everywhere but directly at Pembroke. After a minute he answered hesitantly.

"I was against it, at first," he revealed. "You've been so set on Danvers, you know. But Nelson won't have it any other way. So I finally agreed to run. Listen, boss. . . . Don't fly off the handle. Remember yesterday when we were talking about candidates? We never even considered me. Maybe it won't be such a bad idea after all. We always got along before and there's no reason—"

Fowler stopped, stricken dumb for the moment. Pembroke's face was the reason. It was livid with rage. The Party boss, judging by his expression, was about to have a stroke. He jumped up from his desk and began pacing the floor in short, jerky strides. This seemed to have a beneficial effect, in spite of the fact that Omega apparently decided that he should help by keeping step at his side. Eventually Pembroke stopped pacing and faced Harvey.

"Pardon me," he said, in full control of his voice. "But I was so set on electing Danvers that I couldn't see your perfectly reasonable arguments. But you're right. Fowler could be elected just as well. I'll go along with you. Danvers can wait till next election. Shake on it!"

Harvey, apparently as pleased as he should be, shook hands with the Party boss. Fowler did likewise, beaming all over his face. Omega said "Ugh!" and snatched Pembroke's cigarette from his mouth and tried to puff it. He didn't do so well, but Harvey managed to cover him up by distracting Pembroke's attention.

"He's not used to cigarettes," said Harvey. "But he left his peace pipe home."

Omega said "Ugh!" again.

The three visitors left on that happy note, with Pembroke smilingly bidding them goodbye and assuring them that he'd get the publicity wheels in motion to push Fowler for mayor.

"I don't like it," said Fowler, climbing into the back of Harvey's car. "He didn't make near the fuss I expected him to. He's got something up his sleeve."

"Sure he has," agreed Harvey. "You missed the point, Jim. He's going to announce the candidacy of Danvers in the next edition of the sheet. And I'll be kidnaped before tomorrow!"

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

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The doughty captain waded into the free-for-all, fists flying. "Do something!" Kathy cried; but Mart just sat there, grinning

By Luke Short

Author of "Golden Acres," "King Colt," etc.

Paper Hero

Problem for a writer: What's to do when one of your hairy-chested, jut-jawed brain-children comes to life, with a subpoena in one hand and a haymaker in the other?

LIEUTENANT CASLON swung down the ladder from the bastions, his wounded shoulder sending agony through his whole left side.

He hauled up before Colonel Descharmes and saluted. "Sir, I must ask you again for—"

"Orders from Marakesh," the Colonel rasped savagely, "are to hold Bel Chech at all costs! . . .

"Check up on the spelling of Marakesh, Kathy . . ."

"Blast!" Kathy Gifford said. Her fingers had ceased drumming on the typewriter keys, and now she stopped the record. Wouldn't he ever learn to quit kibitzing through the dictaphone, so that what he said ran right into what his characters said?

She reached for the eraser and then her hand lifted to yank off the earphones, and she sank back in her chair, closing her eyes.

She was dead on her feet, dying another death for dear old *Smashing Tales*, who wanted thirty thousand words before the end of the week. Milk shakes in the office, bed at three and back to work at eight was doing something to her, something besides making her green eyes feel a ruby red and her back like old cracked plaster peeling off the lath underneath.

It was affecting her mind. She wished suddenly and viciously that Lieutenant Buck Caslon's teeth would fall out, that he would get gangrene, that the Touaregs would catch him, draw, quarter and eighth him.

From the next room the familiar drone of Mart Reynolds' voice ceased, and Kathy groaned, but didn't open her eyes. She heard the door open and still her eyes remained closed.

She knew how he'd look—sallow, from no sun, his forehead drawn into a deep scowl, his nice brown eyes preoccupied and bloodshot like her own, his black hair rumpled from fingers running through it, tie yanked down, a stoop in his shoulders and a cigarette smouldering between brown fingers.

His voice said, "Listen, would a heroine get sore if the hero gave another wren, a waitress, say, in a cattletown, a Christmas present?"

"She always has, in your stories, hasn't she?" Kathy opened her eyes. Why any girl in her right mind would love him, Kathy didn't know, but then she wasn't in her right mind. He was, though. He considered her a good secretary, and his affection stopped right there—at the pocketbook.

"Okay," Mart said absently. He came up beside her and looked at the page in the typewriter. "How's it going?"

"Getting too long. How soon does it end?"

"Quick. He socks the Colonel in the puss, busts open the storeroom, finds the shells and proves that Descharmes is in the pay of the Germans," Marty said. "You going to make it?"

He always asked that, knowing that she always made it on time. He picked up a couple of things on her desk

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and looked at them, put them down and took a prowling turn around the room. This was known as plotting. Presently, he would snap his fingers and go back into the office, shut the door, and dictate again into that accursed machine.

THE LETTER SLOT on the door clanked open, and a sheaf of letters plopped into the basket. Marty took them, while Kathy lit a cigarette. Usually, this was the half hour she devoted to his correspondence, just as if he were a business man instead of a lunatic.

Mart, standing by the desk, always ripped the letters open with his fingers. Once he'd torn a check neatly in half as a result, but he'd never learned to use a letter opener.

First one he opened, naturally, was the letter from his agent. It contained two checks. Mart looked at them with satisfaction and Kathy hated him, then. The reason wasn't because every check he got was more than her month's salary, which was magnificent, nor because he didn't earn it, which he did; it was because he always received a check with a naive and childlike pleasure, as if it were the first he ever got and might be the last.

He threw the letter on the desk and said, "Serial for *Red Hand Western* in two weeks. Remind me of that."

He shuffled through the other letters, bored, and finally picked one out and opened it. But his mind was off the mail, now, and Kathy put her cigarette out. She heard him groan. Then he swore and looked at her, his eyes goggling.

"Listen to this," he said, and read, "Dear Mr. Reynolds: I read your story *The Iron Cobweb* in this month's *Otherworlds* and enjoyed it immensely. I should have, because I wrote it. In case you care to look again at the book from which you stole the plot, see my *Where the Dead Walk,* Beecham, 1932. You might have had the grace to change the number of voodoo priests who were resurrected, but you didn't even bother. I'm on a lecture tour now and will be in your city the 29th between my speaking dates at Franconia and Crownpoint. I think I should allow you a chance to explain before I notify my lawyers to start suit for plagiarism. Capt. L. Bruce Rowan."

Mart lowered the letter and stared at Kathy, and she stared back.

"Is it true?" she asked.

"I don't even remember *The Iron Cobweb,*" Mart wailed.

KATHY found it in the files behind her chair. She handed the carbon to him, and he glanced at it and then groaned again. "Boy, am I in for it!"

"Then you did steal it?"

Mart ignored the insult and stared gloomily at the carbon. "I guess. How was I to know? I read it in Pie Stafford's column in the *Herald-Argus.*"

"But what did it say?"

"He'd just been to Philly and he labeled his column *Notes from the Quaker Oafs* that morning. I remember that because it was so corny. Then somewhere in the column he said 'Ghost-storying the other night in a Main Line hogan, and the one that cut the mustard was a true tale of seven native priests who came back from the dead to rule a kingdom. I'll pull the shades in my taxis for a year after that one.' "

"Then Bruce-Rowan *was* there," Kathy said.

"Sure he was," Mart said bitterly. "Can't you see him? Pulling out all the old wheezes buried in his books that nobody ever read! What I can't understand is how that little snob of a Pie Stafford missed naming him. Usually, if Pie is in the same town with a big name, he's had lunch with him in his column next day."

Mart looked despairingly at the carbon again and threw it on the desk. He walked over to the window that looked out across a courtyard to the windows of a dozen other offices and rammed his hands in his hip pockets.

Kathy roused herself from a deep dream of sleep. "Bruce-Rowan always looked so nice in the shipboard pictures, too."

"Why wouldn't he?" Mart said bitterly. "That's the only reason he goes exploring—so he can have his picture taken."

The cynicism in Mart's tone was suddenly galling to Kathy. "What do you know about him?"

"He's a phony, a woman's-club Steffansson."

"But how do you know?"

"I can tell," Mart said belligerently, turning his head. "Did any museum or society ever back him? No. He's the guy that always reaches the Golden City of Hari Kari—and then on the way back his canoe tips over and the films that would have proved his discovery are lost in the bottom of the river. Nuts."

"That's absolutely foul, Mart!" Kathy cried. "You haven't one shred of proof. Admit it, now—have you?"

Mart turned back to the window. "You've got a vocational disease," he gloomed. "You've written about too many Ralph Rassendales of the fair hair and the cookstove jaw. You want to believe they really exist."

"Maybe I do," Kathy said tartly. "Maybe I get tired of looking fourteen hours a day at the Brain with No Biceps."

"Just wait," Mart said. A little color had crept into his face and he looked hurt. "Someday, I'll bring you the head of Rima, the Bird Girl and autograph it for you!"

This is childish, Kathy thought. It's because I'm tired, because I'm dead for sleep. And if I don't watch out, I'll razz him right out of my job. She knew Mart was staring at her with a puzzled and hurt expression, and she picked up the earphones.

"Sorry, Mart," Kathy murmured. "I'm tired and edgy, I guess."

"Finish that and go home and sleep," Mart said. "I'll dream up a stall for Captain Bruce-Rowan some way."

"Have you looked at the calendar? This is the twenty-ninth, you know."

Mart didn't seem to hear her and Kathy wouldn't repeat it. He knew everything, she thought bitterly; let him find that out.

AT FIVE MINUTES to twelve, *The Cache at Bel Chech* was swallowed in the air mail slot at the post-office, and Kathy went home to sleep.

She had barely got to sleep, it seemed, when she felt her mother's hand on her shoulder. "'Phone, sweetie. It's that maniac of a Reynolds again and he insists I wake you up."

Kathy was about to protest violently when she saw the sun in her window and knew that she'd slept hours. She dragged herself to the hall phone and gave it a sleepy hello.

"Get any sleep, Kathy?" Mart's voice asked.

"I'm still getting it," Kathy said drowsily. "Revision tonight?"

Mart laughed. "No, I'm dining with the White Mahout of the Seven Sacred Elephants of Siam. So are you."

"Bruce-Rowan? Is he nice?"

"Veddy. Oh, quite," Mart sneered. "See if you can get down to this playing field of Eton and save the Reynolds Empire. No, I'll call for you in an hour, just to make sure."

"But what if I don't want—"

"An hour and a half, then," Mart said. "Wear as

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little as possible, K-4. The plans are ours if you can dazzle him." And he hung up.

Kathy had bathed and was dressing when her resentment crawled out of its wraps again. He was using her as bait, just like any phoney character in his phoney stories. And on a man who was probably the right sort, but for whom Mart had taken an unreasonable and unfair dislike.

Perversely, Kathy found herself liking Capt. Bruce-Rowan without having seen him. When she was dressed and looked at herself in the glass she saw a slim-hipped, long-legged girl with green eyes and long tawny hair that almost touched a pair of beautiful shoulders.

It reminded her, as everything did, of Mart and how he hated to describe women. "There's blondes, brunettes and redheads," he would groan. "Now go on from there." And his love scenes—wooden, stilted and hilariously funny. It was a tender subject with him, these love scenes, and she had secretly rewritten a hundred of them for him, but he didn't know that, of course, because she would have died rather than tell him.

And then she heard his horn out front, and she was furious again. He's just like a small town pool-shark calling on his dame, she thought savagely. But she went out.

Mart, seeing her dress, said, "Say, that's nice."

"Nice enough to come in the house and escort to your car, like a white man?" Kathy said tartly.

"I was plotting," Mart said. "I've got a new angle for this *Red Hand Western* serial."

All the way down town, Kathy listened to Mart's plotting, thinking that he could look nice when he wanted to. He was wearing a white linen coat, and because it was a shade whiter than his face it gave him a faint and false illusion of tan.

AT THE Parkington, lushest of the city's hotels, Mart called Bruce-Rowan's room and then they went into the bar and ordered Martinis.

Presently, Mart said, "Here he is," and rose. Captain L. Bruce-Rowan, at both first and second sight, looked like a good reason for a woman going to India and losing her youth. Tall, incredibly tanned, he had pale and wavy hair that matched his mustache. It was not a guardsman's mustache and not a Hitler number; it covered his lip and was just right, bold enough for the stern gray eyes and wide shoulders fitted with a Bond street dinner jacket.

As they supped their drinks, Bruce-Rowan chatted amiably and was amusingly attentive to Kathy, who was secretly flattered. He explained that he kept his title of Captain, which he didn't really deserve, because once in his beachcombing days at Macao he'd angered the British Resident who deported him on a pirate's junk, and they'd called him Captain ever since.

They went into dinner in the Platinum Room, got the best table because Mart knew the headwaiter, and let Bruce-Rowan order the meal.

Kathy thought, "This is the McCoy, it really is," and dreaded the moment when Mart would bring up the subject of the lawsuit. It came at coffee, and was served up in Mart's best "Let's call a spade a spade" manner. He explained the circumstances of his getting the story, apologized, saw no need of a lawsuit between civilized men, and then subsided.

Captain Bruce-Rowan smiled faintly. "Drop it? Not on your life, old boy. No such thing." He hunched forward, elbows on the table and said seriously, "Somebody has got to teach you chaps a lesson. A handful of us poor devils who have an urge to see what's over the next mountain go out and see it. We do a little work and spend a lot of money and get filthy broke and sick, but we come back with something we've seen first hand. You chaps sit in an armchair with a reference book and write fantastic tales and coin a mint out of it, a positive mint. I've written the reference books you see, so I know."

Kathy thought, "That's true," and looked at Mart. He was hunched down in his chair, unimpressed.

Bruce-Rowan went on, "You stole that story of the voodoo priests and you admit it. It isn't the first time it's happened to me. I remember when I got thrown out of Shepheards Hotel in Cairo, broke. While the manager was apologizing in the lobby, I chanced to see a magazine serial based on a book of mine. It had to be mine. I was the only chap who'd been into that country. I've never forgotten it, you see."

He smiled at Kathy and leaned back. "So I'm only getting what I deserve, old boy, and so are you."

Mart shrugged and lighted a cigarette. Bruce-Rowan went on to other subjects, but soon looked at his watch.

"I must go," he said, and turned to Kathy. "I'm driving over to Crownpoint for my Boys' Club lecture tomorrow afternoon. Would you like to come with me?"

Kathy was thrilled. She looked at Mart and Mart said immediately, "Take the day off, of course."

It was settled and Bruce-Rowan left.

Kathy was silent for a moment and then she looked at Mart. "You really don't care about tomorrow, Mart?"

"No." He made a wry face. "Every kid is entitled to a trip to the zoo now and then."

Kathy flared up. "Just because he's British, don't be poisonous."

"Who said he was?" Mart asked. He called for the check. When the waiter was gone, Kathy said hotly, "Well, this is once your sour cynical hunches are wrong! Of course he's English! Maybe he's not the St. James club type, but he is English."

He said a little wearily, "There's a big red book in the office called Who's Who. Look him up. Born in Red Wing, Minnesota, 1898. Graduated St. Boniface college." He paused, hand on her chair. "Want to hear more?"

"I want to go home!" Kathy said furiously.

IF KATHY had kept a diary, her entry for the day following would have begun, "Dear Diary. Wow!" All of it, from his tweeds to his convertible, from the lunch they had in a little place off the Crownpoint pike to his talk before the Crownpoint Boys' club, was unforgetable. Even the fact that she had a date with Mart that night couldn't spoil it. She had actually felt jealous and possessive when the kids almost mobbed Skipper (he'd told her to call him that) after the lecture. Maybe the best part of it was that Skipper had loved it too. At least he'd begged her to break the date with Mart, and when she refused, he asked her at least to persuade Mart to include him in the party.

She was late for the date with Mart, but he was even later, which angered her. She wouldn't admit it, but she'd wanted to step out of Skipper's car in front of Mart smoking moodily on the front steps. She wanted to make him wait an hour while she changed. She wanted to be kind to Mart that night, but dreamy and absentminded, so he could see she simply wasn't interested in his cynical company. But the arrival was a flop. Mom had gone to the movies, the house was empty and hot, and she felt let down.

Mart phoned and said, "Sorry I'm late, Kathy, but I've been trying to get hold of the White King of Balinao. The pukka sahib says yes, he'd like to try out Ameddican bock beer, especially in the company of my secretary and a certain journalist, Pie Stafford. I'll be around in ten minutes."

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Beer drinking, Kathy thought. Oh Lord! Doesn't the fool know that Skipper can't abide his type, and that he's just clinching the plagiarism suit? It wasn't being disloyal to Mart to think he was a fool; she'd thought that a lot of the times before she'd met Skipper.

Mart arrived with Pie Stafford, a little toad of a man whom Kathy loathed. Pie was fattish, foppishly dressed and fawningly grateful when anybody noticed him. He was a graduate of the society and lonely hearts column and as inquisitive as a nasty child. His column in the *Herald Argus, Night and Daze,* was a deft mixture of vicious tattling, innuendo and disguised blackmail.

He was all Kathy needed to make the evening unbearable, and if Mart hoped to mingle Pie's pleadings with his own in the hope of influencing Skipper, he was crazier than she thought.

While Mart blandly blocked a dozen taxis at the Parkington entrance, Pie went up for Captain Bruce-Rowan. Skipper's greetings were lost in the blast of taxi horns urging Mart to move. Kathy felt embarrassed for Mart, who hadn't noticed anything wrong.

Once they were out of the din and Pie properly introduced, Skipper said genially, "What about this bock beer?"

"It's months too late for it," Mart said, "but I know a joint outside of town that still has some." He frowned. "Trouble is, it's a tough joint."

"This is a democratic country," Skipper said. "Let's go."

ON THE drive out, Kathy listened to Pie's opening guns. He was asking revoltingly personal questions about where Skipper had been and where he was going, and Skipper was answering them politely. Publicity, Kathy thought. Otherwise, Skipper would mangle him.

Mart pulled off the road onto a cinder apron in front of a long and dingy stucco building whose neon sign proclaimed *Mayflower Nite Club*. They regarded it in silence and then Mart said doubtfully, "I dunno."

Kathy looked at the cars parked on the apron. Certainly, there were no limousines there, and more than a sprinkling of trucks.

"Nonsense," Skipper said. "If the beer is there, let's go in."

Pie only looked uneasy.

They came out of the car and Skipper led the way in. As they were entering, another car drove up, and two men in caps got out. The door opened into a narrow barroom, and a dozen men in shirtsleeves and a couple of women were at the bar. Mart waved to the barkeep and went on down the room to a big double door, which let onto a darkened room with booths forming an L. The women eyed Kathy with curiosity and hostility, and she was glad when they took a booth. Skipper sat beside her, Mart opposite her and Pie, still uneasy, beside Mart, and beers were ordered.

Skipper looked around the room. Just then a couple danced by, the man in shirtsleeves, cap on head, truck license on cap. Skipper looked at Kathy and grinned wryly. Two men started a round of booths opposite, stopping occasionally to greet friends.

The beer came and Kathy watched Skipper taste it. He smacked his lips and said, "Wonderful," and Kathy knew he was just being polite. Mart lit a cigarette without offering anyone else one, and Pie said, "This is vile, simply vile."

The two men sidled past the booth, looking at them. One stopped and pushed his cap farther back on his head and said to Kathy, "How's about a jig, babe?"

They all stared at him in silence, and he continued to chew gum and grin. He was pleasantly tough looking, and there was no doubt about the width of his shoulders. His companion put his elbow on the back of the booth, leaned his face against his hand and looked innocently and wonderingly at Pie.

Kathy glanced first at Mart, helpless.

Mart only said, "If you want to dance, go ahead."

Kathy looked imploringly at Skipper, who turned to the man and said, "Shove off, old boy. We're just having beer."

"Can't the dame talk?" the man said.

"Shove off, I said," Skipper repeated.

The man winked at Kathy and said, "Walk over him, toots."

Skipper came out of his seat and hit the man leaning on the booth. He knocked him flat, and now that his rear was protected, he started for the speaker. There was an unmistakeable stamping of feet in a fight that any smart bartender can identify even if he's in another room. Also, any connoisseur of barroom brawls can identify it, and at least half those at the bar did. They could have identified it by Pie Stafford's squeal, anyway, and they swarmed into the room.

Captain Bruce-Rowan was doing a nice job against the two even before he got help from a trucker. Another trucker who hated white shirts on general principle chose the opposite side, and a brace of other bystanders took desultory pokes at anyone passing by.

Kathy tried to get up and the table cut her off at the hips and sat her down again. She looked at Mart who, face in hand, cigarette smouldering, was enjoying the scene.

"Mart, do something!" Kathy cried. "They'll kill him!"

"He's doing all right."

"But help him!"

Mart looked at her in wonder. "And get my neck broke? Oh, no, this is his party."

SOMEBODY across the way was swinging a beer bottle, and Pie, arm over face, squealed. Then the bartender, who had paused long enough to call the State Police, made his entry, a bouncer on either hand, a blackjack hanging from his wrist.

It got good then, for a moment, with a couple of women kicking shins and yelling, but the bartender knew his job. One bouncer pinned Skipper's arms, the other grabbed the man who wanted to dance and who now had a nicely pumping bloody nose, and the bartender slugged the others off.

"Turn that guy loose," the bartender said to Skipper's bouncer, "and pick up that lug's chum."

Skipper was freed and he stalked back to the table while the bartender broke up the gang. Kathy rose and cried, "Skipper, did they hurt you?"

But Skipper was unmarked, except for a couple of skinned knuckles. As Mart observed, he could take care of himself.

The bartender came up, blackjack dangling from wrist, and said to Mart, "You better take a powder, Mr. Reynolds. The state cops are on their way."

"Okay," Mart said, and rose almost reluctantly, putting away his cigarettes.

The bartender grinned. "Kind of hated to break it up, but they'll yank my license if I don't."

He showed them out a side door and bid them a courteous good evening.

When they came out into the light of the neon sign, Kathy on Skipper's arm, Skipper seemed to just now see Mart. He said drily, "Thanks for the help, old chap."

"Sure, sure," Mart said, unconcernedly.

Pie said, "How disgusting," and shivered and scuttled ahead of Mart to the car.

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Kathy took the back seat with Skipper, and made soothing sounds as they swung into the pavement.

Skipper's anger had had time to function now, and he said, "There's nothing like fighting back to back with a good friend, old chap. Try it some time."

Mart said, "I will. But I couldn't tonight."

"And why not?" Kathy asked scornfully.

"I paid those two guys to pick the fight," Mart answered.

There was a moment of complete and dead silence, and then Skipper said, "Oh."

Mart said, "It'll read pretty funny to your Boys' Clubs, won't it? *Soldier of Fortune in Night Club Brawl.* Tough on Young America, don't you think?"

Pie looked alarmed, and then Skipper said quietly, "I see. That's what Mr. Stafford was doing along tonight."

"Why else would he drink beer?" Mart said.

Skipper untwined Kathy's arm and moved over a foot. "What a chump," he mused. "Somehow, I didn't think the girl was in it."

"I wasn't!" Kathy cried.

"LET'S TALK business," Mart interrupted coldly, watching Skipper in the rear view mirror. "It's up to you. Will you file suit for plagiarism against me, and have me plaster this brawl all over the papers, so your lecture tour will be canceled? Or will you sign a release and trust me to forget it?"

Mart was smiling. "Let me point out the advantages and disadvantages. By suing me, you might win a judgment that's bigger than your lecture fees. But that would take several months, and besides you'd have to prove that the stuff I swiped from you was original with you. I don't think it is. I'm willing to spend a lot of money proving you're a phoney. Once I do, you're washed up for good. On the other hand, just sign a release and I'll let you go on showing the hair on your chest to Young America."

Kathy cried, "Mart, you couldn't—"

"Shut up. The captain wants to say something."

Skipper was silent a moment. "If you don't keep your word, you know, I'll sue you for slander."

"Your privilege," Mart said. "So the suit's off?"

"It looks that way," Captain Bruce-Rowan agreed equably.

They were silent as Mart pulled up in front of the office building. They signed the night book and went up to Mart's office. Kathy, at Mart's orders, typed out the release. She had a hard time keeping the tears out of her eyes, but she did.

Mart shoved the paper in front of Captain Bruce-Rowan, who signed it, and Pie and Kathy witnessed it.

Mart looked on with amused curiosity. Taking the release, he murmured, "You had a pretty good thing there, Rowan. It's a lot easier to chisel dough that it is to earn it. Only, get smart. Study up on your line."

"Isn't it good?"

"There's no British Resident at Macao. It's a Portuguese colony. Any pulp writer knows that."

Captain Bruce-Rowan nodded gravely. "Thanks, I'll remember that." He looked at Kathy, and his smile was just as warming and pleasant as ever. "Thanks for a nice time," and walked out.

Pie glared venomously at both of them and started for the door too. Mart said quietly, "Keep it out of your sheet, Pie, or I'll cut your fat little throat."

Pie drew himself up and said with dignity, "It was never in my mind, even. I'm not a reporter."

Pie went out, and Kathy was left alone with Mart. He leaned against the wall, moodily regarding her as she sat at the typewriter.

"I wouldn't have minded it so much if he hadn't tried to steal my girl, too," Mart said.

Kathy let a long fifteen seconds pass, and then she said, "If I'd known that, maybe I wouldn't have encouraged him. You might have told me."

"I've tried," Mart said earnestly. "You don't know how I've been trying to tell you. But I'm no good at it, Kathy. You know darn well I can't handle the goo end of it. You've rewritten enough of my love scenes to know that."

"How did you know that?"

Mart almost yelled it. "Because I've read all of 'em a dozen times to find out how to tell you I love you, but yours are as bad as mine are."

Kathy stared at him in complete and utter silence, and Mart slowly put both hands on the desk. "At that," he said seriously, "neither of us ever forgot the clinch in the fadeout."

He thought better of kissing her over the desk and started around it instead. Kathy had typed too many endings not to know what the girl did.

NEW YORK IN RUINS?

The time has come for Americans to think about the possibility that our own cities may be bombed. The Atlantic no longer shields us; we are vulnerable!

What this means to John Smith, American, is something ARGOSY wanted to find out. *Could* we be bombed? (The answer is Yes!) Who would send us those immense packages of death, and why—and when? How many people would be killed, how much property destroyed? And, above all—*what are we doing about it?*

The answers are all in an urgently timely article

NAZI TERROR OVER NEW YORK

By Robinson MacLean

Coming in next week's Argosy—October 4

On sale Sept. 24

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Static raged through the headphones as the plane was sucked down into the crackling maelstrom

Give Them Wings

By Louis C. Goldsmith

Author of "Fools Fly High," etc.

Farren was a Yank; they were English. He was trying to teach them how to fly—but there was a lesson in naked courage to be learned from them. And the final examination was held in a storm-tossed plane, with Death's icy fingers frozen on the controls. Exciting Novelet.

I

STANDING BEFORE his class in weather flying, John Farren tried to keep from his voice the growing dislike that he had for these twelve English smart alecks. "The problems of bombing operations," he said, "are very much those of airlines. There is no use in taking a load of passengers into killing weather. Nor" he finished, "is there any use in taking a half-million-dollar bomber out and wrecking it in bad weather, before reaching the objective."

Eply Gimp, the little cockney, threw in his usual objection to anything the American said. "If yer leave it on the ground long henough, the 'uns'll come over and blarst it to 'ell, anyway. So what's the dif?"

John tried to ignore the snicker of approval that fol-

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lowed this comment. The strained, putty-like whiteness of Gimp's face and his humped sitting posture caught John's attention. "Are you sick, Gimp?" he asked.

"Takes more'n a bellyache and a bit a' bad weather to keep a Henglishman on the tarmac," Gimp retorted, grimacing. He was like a small, quarrelsome dog, knowing that the others of the class were amused by his impertinence; enjoying because of this, unaccustomed importance.

The other English boys sobered at this too-direct thrust at Yankee courage and Ted Wrightson said, in a sharp whisper: "Have a care, Gimp!"

Farren turned to the blackboard on which the last twelve-hour weather map had been partially drawn. He caught himself with that recurring surprise that he, a captain pilot of the Skyspeed Lines, should have volunteered to instruct these fault-finding English students. His hands fairly itched to yank that sneering little cockney from his seat, turn him over his knee and give him a good solid whopping.

But that was the one thing he must not do; lose his temper. "Remember," the Skyspeed chief pilot said, when John took this assignment, "you'll be representing the United States with these boys. Handle them with kid gloves, John. Teach them all you can on the ground. Then make a couple of day trips and a night trip with them in bad weather. But not *too* bad, mind you, because each one of them represents fifteen thousand dollars that the U. S. has spent in their flying instruction."

John completed the weather map on the blackboard.

"The weather map today," John said, using a yardstick as a pointer, "is identical to that of yesterday."

A low, combined groan responded from the class. John had cancelled last night's flight on account of that weather.

Farren continued: "There is this tremendous low-pressure area covering the Northwest and extending far out over the Pacific. Up here," using the yardstick to point, "is this static high-pressure, an extremely high pressure, holding stationary just north of the Canadian border."

"Where it's 'eld for the larst week," Gimp interrupted.

"Quiet!" Cadet-captain Wrightson said sharply.

"Now," John continued in the same dry, level voice, "there is a cardinal rule for all bad-weather flying. Always, *always* figure an 'out' for yourself, should everything go all wrong. In this case our haven of refuge would be the emergency field called Hamlet, west side of the mountains."

Farren turned from the blackboard, saw that the class wasn't in the least interested. Something had to be done! "Tonight," he announced, in a hard, rapid voice, "we'll make a trip over to Denton, five hours. We'll leave here at ten o'clock."

THERE WAS a moment of silence. Farren was angry because his hand had been forced. He couldn't resist adding a little sarcasm. "You know all the military frills attached to this trip. You brave lads are supposed to be leaving England to bomb munition works at Potsdam. My problem is to show you how to get to Denton . . . that is, Potsdam, in bad weather."

"We'll get there. We'll bomb 'ell outa 'em," Gimp promised. His face twisted with a sudden pain and he wrapped both arms around his middle.

"If you don't start eating real food, instead of that trash from the canteen, you won't get any place," Farren told him. "Class dismissed."

Ted Wrightson, cadet-captain, waited until the others had left the room. Farren was gathering a thick sheaf of weather maps and reports that he had intended using, to show them what that high-pressure area might or might not do to affect flying weather.

Wrightson said, in an embarrassed voice, "My sister asked me to explain . . . that is, about the tea. . . "

"At the Hostess House yesterday?" John helped out, trying to make his voice sound careless, and miserably failing. "Think nothing of it, Wrightson."

Wrightson showed his relief. He continued, with an English lack of tact, "It was just for our boys. We had some plans to talk over."

"Don't mention it," Farren begged, understanding why English diplomacy usually resorted to dreadnoughts and twelve-inch guns. He had always, as a matter of courtesy, been invited to the Hostess teas, presided over by Helen Wrightson, the cadet-captain's sister. Since he hadn't, in this case been invited, the less said the better. John closed his briefcase and stood up from the table.

Wrightson said, "I'm glad you decided to make the trip tonight. And you mustn't let our grousing trouble you, sir."

Farren gave him a straight look. "I'm not, Wrightson. Not in the least. I've been flying airline for twelve years and should know a little about it. But you boys seem to think that all you need to do is start out with a lot of English bulldog determination and you'll get there with your bombs." Farren shrugged. "Well, maybe you can. Maybe you've got something we Yankees lack."

He shouldn't have said that, Farren knew, pausing outside the school building, looking with distaste at the low-hanging clouds, at the dreary mist of rain that had been sifting down for the last two weeks.

Thomas, Chief Pilot of Skyspeed had told him that he represented the United States.

John pulled up his raincoat collar. "If it's gotta be done, it's gotta be done," he muttered. That had always been his attitude toward the unpleasant things of life, and he wasn't going to let any English kids change it.

HE WALKED over to his new car, and pride in its ownership lessened his unwonted feeling of dissatisfaction with life. This sleek, impressive beauty, with its gleaming chrome trim, its oil drive and whatnot, had been something of a strain to his finances. But the way things were there was a big gamble on future car production. Better buy now, everybody said.

A mile from the field, ahead of him on the straight stretch of road through the swamp, he saw Helen Wrightson's Ford. Seeing that old wreck of a car brought a quick, warm glow within him.

Once, Helen had seemed to like him. He was sure that he could read it in the clear, straight look of her blue eyes; in the faint color that warmed her face when he stopped in at the Hostess House canteen. But English girls are funny. Without being at all coy she held him at arm's length and kept him always wondering.

Her car was stationary. Pulling to a smooth halt beside it, John said the first thing that came to mind. "What's happened to the one-hoss shay?" he asked.

She said, primly. "How do you do, Mr. Farren?"

Like most healthy young American males, John Farren was a little awed and fearful of a beautiful woman, and like many of them he covered this feeling of inferiority with a rather heavy, inane humor. "It's a wonder that

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contraption hasn't fallen to pieces long before this," he grinned. "Let's jack the steering wheel up and run a new car under it."

He was puzzled by the scarlet that mounted in her aristocratic face. What in thunder caused that?

She glanced back over the deserted road, as though hopeful that someone would be coming, then said coldly: "Please go on, Mr. Farren. There is nothing wrong."

"Except a flat tire on your right front," he agreed cheerfully. "Hop in here and I'll let you drive a real car."

Her lips tightened. "I don't care to drive your *real* car. I wish you'd go on."

"All right. All right," John said disgustedly, and backed his car up to park behind her.

Getting out he gave the spare tire on her car a kick in passing, that shivered the whole machine. That tire was already so far gone that it wouldn't have surprised him if a blowout had resulted from the impact of his shoe. He opened the rear door and pulled the seat forward, looking for tools.

"What are you going to do?" Helen Wrightson inquired.

John looked at her in exasperation. "If it's gotta be done, it's gotta be done," he stated reasonably.

"If it's gotta be done, it's gotta . . . what do you mean?"

"I mean I'm going to change your tire, since you are so—so darned stubborn. Where's your tools?"

"If there had been any tools, I would have changed it."

"No tools," John grumbled and turned to his own car.

When he got back she was standing by the front of the machine, knotting a scarf over the damp tumble of her brown hair.

"No need for two of us to get wet," John said.

"I like rain," Helen Wrightson informed him. "In fact," her blue eyes challenged him, "I quite enjoy many things that you Americans appear to despise. I could have afforded a better car, only it didn't seem sensible. . . ."

"For the love of Pete!" John exploded, getting up from putting his jack under the axle, "I wasn't hinting that you didn't have enough money to buy a good car. I—don't you English ever josh each other?"

"Josh. . .? Oh, I see." Her laughter was brittle. "You Yankees rather fancy your sense of humor, don't you?"

"Nuts!" John said rudely, and got down on his knees again in the muck. The new paint on the jack made it work hard, so that when he moved the handle it came out from its place under the axle.

The girl watched his efforts. "You hold the jack," she offered, "and I'll work the handle."

JOHN WAS AWARE of her slender body beside his and once, for a little while, the pressure of her forehead was against his arm, as she worked. He forgot all about his anger in his awareness of her nearness.

"Isn't it clever?" she exclaimed, as the axle started to rise. They were so close that he could feel the stir of her breath against his cheek. "I mean the jack," she explained. "You Yankees build everything so—so just right. And everything you build, works."

Farren looked at the jack, frowning, trying to see what there was so wonderful about it. Then he looked at her. There was a short, breathless time when their eyes met in a complete understanding. It was gone in a flash. He should have kissed her then. Every sensible instinct within him urged this sealing of a permanent truce. But in a moment, it was too late.

She was standing and her cool voice denied that there ever had been such a moment. "When are you going to do the night flying, Mr. Farren?" she asked in an offhand, conversational tone.

Her question nettled him, reminder that it was his department that delayed the English class in finishing their American training. "I suppose you're another one who's blaming the weather on me," he grumbled.

She looked at him with her direct, candid eyes. "You *are* ill-mannered," she stated. "You deliberately try to make quarrels."

"All right," he agreed, exasperated, "I'm ill-mannered. And I don't know my business and I'm afraid to fly bad weather."

"What . . . who. . . ?"

"Oh, I know what they think of me; what you people think of all Yankees, for that matter. We haven't any courage, we're penny-pinching tradesmen. And we're vulgar and haven't any background. We haven't any baronial halls. . . ." John paused, surprised that she had the power to arouse such fury in him.

"Ah, that's what we think of you, is it?" she said, in a quiet, reflective voice. "And what do you think of us?"

John turned abruptly to the business of getting the tire off. He hadn't realized how this bitterness had been piling up in his mind.

"What do you think of us?" she insisted, challenging him. "Or are you afraid to tell?"

"I think that your people are very brave, Miss Wrightson," John said quietly. "And I think that you're right in calling me ill-mannered. I'll add to that that I talk too much."

"You really think that the English are muddling, conceited, self-centered fools. That we already owe your country money and that we're begging more."

John got the rim free. "I'll put this in the back seat," he said. "You'll want to get it fixed." He went back for the spare tire.

Helen Wrightson followed him. "You're not going to answer me, are you?"

Her tone frightened him. He knew that she wasn't a girl who would start weeping. But it left him in a panic, having her so near to revealing the unnameable grief and terror that was in her low voiced question.

"Helen—I mean, Miss Wrightson, don't you think we'd better stop talking about such things?"

He covered her silence, wondering at the grief that had been so plain in her voice. And the horrible fear that was with it.

His words came in a monotone: "I've tried to tell those boys that there are some kinds of weather you can't fly. After all, Miss Wrightson, war is a business, just like airline flying. If you don't deliver your load, you don't get paid. If you don't drop your bombs on the objective, you haven't accomplished anything. And you're very apt to lose a half-million dollar bomber, plus the crew. And it costs time and money to train airmen. Lots of it."

He finished his job in silence, letting the car off the jack. "Better drive slowly," he advised. "That spare's none too good."

Her voice was sober, not quite steady. "Thank you for repairing it," she said. She paused getting into the car. "Mr. Farren, is that the way you explained it to them? I mean, about losing the expensive bomber?"

He hesitated, knowing there was something back of the

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question. "Well . . . yes, something along those lines."

"I see. Goodbye, Mr. Farren. And thank you again."

II

THAT 'goodbye' had a sound of finality to it that bothered Farren, repeating itself in his mind during the afternoon. He knew that Helen Wrightson belonged to some kind of an English auxiliary corps, whose business it was to keep their soldiers cheered up. She and another, older woman from England, ran the canteen and Hostess House at the airfield. But perhaps Helen would return to England with her brother.

John hadn't thought of that before and the thought of it now appalled him. He simply couldn't let her go out of his life; go back there where civilians were being killed off by the thousands! And yet, what was there he could do to prevent it?

He thought he might ask Ted Wrightson, pointblank, what Helen planned to do. But he lacked the courage when he got out to the field that evening. He could imagine the blank stare Wrightson would give him. "Really, my dear chap," he'd probably say. "One doesn't discuss one's sister with a Yankee lout."

Of course he wouldn't say that last. But he'd mean it. John knew what they all thought of him. He had seen this contempt in their faces when he lectured them; when he tried to explain why war should be considered a business. They couldn't understand that.

They must have thought they had forced him into making this night flight, despite the threatening weather. At least they were all quite friendly as they gathered in the Ready room, each carrying his own maps, navigation and bombing data.

They didn't know that John Farren, like most airline pilots, had a line sharply drawn between flyable and non-flyable weather. They didn't know what deep-rooted contempt an airline pilot has for anything verging on the reckless; anything that would endanger his ship or passengers.

Eply Gimp was downright repulsive in his eagerness to be friendly. Every other word was a "sir" when he brought his flight plan to John for a check and criticisms.

"How d'you feel this evening?" Farren inquired, glancing up at the narrow, unhealthy-looking face.

"Me, sir! Ripping, sir. We'll show them blinkin' Jerries a few t'night, eh?"

That seemed to be with them all, awake or asleep . . . the urgent need to bring discomfort to the German cause. Which was all right, Farren allowed. Except that it made them lose perspective; made them tend to disregard the cold facts of what they could or couldn't do.

"Since you feel so ripping," John mocked, "let me call attention to this gap in the *low* contours over the first range of mountains. Also, let me call your attention to the 5,500 foot elevation of those mountains which, according to your plan, we will cross, flying blind, at six-thousand."

"That's five-hundred-foot clearance, sir."

"Uh-huh. Well, we'll cross 'em at seven thousand. And you'll fly this first shift."

"Aw, sir! Won't yer give me a bit o' 'ard flyin', sir?"

John gave him, instead, a hard, tight smile. "Maybe so," he agreed. "If you still have a taste for it by the time we've crossed that first range."

AT THE END of the take-off runway, John made the cockney go through a methodical check of ignition, instruments and control servels. You might have to take a pursuit ship off cross-wind, with a cold engine. But not a bomber.

He had thought all of these things out carefully. He made no demands of them that they couldn't follow out under war conditions, but otherwise there was no relaxing in the needs for safe, sane flying. Bombing was like airline flying. You had a payload to deliver at the end of the run. Bombs or passengers . . . what was the difference, so far as flying went?

He motioned for Gimp to take the wheel. The little cockney shifted nervously on his seat-pack parachute. He was so small that he must reach the full length of his arm to shove the throttles ahead.

The engines came to life, like two lusty, brazen-throated giants that had formerly been grumbling a little in slumber. The eleven other cadets, riding in the cabin with interphone headsets to their ears, each checked the take-off time and got busy with wind and course computers.

They were in the overcast at a thousand feet. The wing lights threw a ghostly radiance about the ship. John sat back in his seat, watching Gimp's intent concentration on the blind-flying instruments.

Gimp leveled off at seven thousand, glancing at Farren. Farren nodded approval of his flying and the cockney beamed with pleasure.

John switched on the radio range receiver that was wired to his headset alone. The others must use directional loop, relying on commercial broadcasts. There would be no beams for them to ride, flying into German territory.

Henry Westbrook, assigned first watch as navigator, passed his data up for Farren's approval. *Course 96°, wind SW 28, Brown's Junction 22:38. . . .*

Farren nodded and initialed the sheet. He dimmed the instrument lights, sat humped forward, watching the blackness ahead.

The plane lurched to port, and storm static built up in his earphones. John cut volume to a thin whine of the beam. He was smiling, watching the windshield.

A FAINT HAIRLINE of light wriggled down the black surface of the windshield. Farren pretended not to see it, nor the quick, puzzled glance from the cockney. He switched to the interphone circuit, so that each cadet could hear him back in the cabin. He said, in a dry, lecturing voice: "You will all please observe the top surface of the wings."

Gimp's voice came on the earphone: "I seen a ruddy beacon light ahead, sir. Wot's 'appenin' to the windshield, sir?"

"You saw a beacon light through seven thousand feet of clouds!"

Gimp's voice thinned with fright. "Gorblimey, sir, she's afire!"

The windshield was laced now with flaming threads. Sparks blinked in the dark places between the threads and each propeller was a blazing disk.

Gimp's hands went slack on the control wheel. Farren jerked it back out of the resulting dive. "Keep your wits about you!"

A ball of flame swelled up on the starboard side near the fuselage and rolled deliberately to span the wing.

Gimp yelped in panic.

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"Hold that wheel steady!" Farren shouted. "Remember that load of bombs you've got to deliver to Potsdam!"

The words were like a whip laid across the frightened man. To Farren's surprise Gimp did steady on the wheel.

The cockney didn't have much of a chin. But what there was of it, thrust forward now in a grim determination to ride through this welter of hell fire and deliver those mythical bombs.

Farren was disappointed. Triumph had been jerked from his grasp by this little ratty man whose mind now must be a turmoil of fear.

There was a tinge of respect in Farren's voice as he spoke over the interphone to the other cadets: "Gimp is now flying through a static condition that is perfectly harmless, except for its effect on radio reception. It's known as Saint Elmo's fire."

Gimp relaxed, smiling at Farren. "I was 'arf balmy, sir," he confessed. "It's a bleedin' good thing we never tried to fly through 'ere no lower."

Farren nodded, returning the smile. He was beginning to halfway like this little beggar.

The windows started misting up inside. John turned on the de-icing fan that hung in a bracket from the cab ceiling. The outside-air temperature gauge told him there was no danger of picking up ice on the ship. But this old equipment wasn't so good for storm flying. At the first sign of real icing, they'd turn back.

Yeah, turn back. Let them talk about him all they please. He knew what that high pressure above the Canadian border could do if it ever broke loose.

III

AT ten thirty-five he got the peak signal and a Z-marker flash from the Junction station. A few minutes later Westbrook handed him the navigation sheet. *Over Brown's Junction at 22:38.*

John penciled the three minute correction and initialed it.

They were out of the static area. Gimp was enjoying himself hugely, eating coconut creams, tossing in an occasional helping of salted peanuts. That mixture, with soda pop and hotdogs, seemed to represent the cockney's idea of gastronomic heaven-on-earth.

For the first time since he had started instructing the class, Farren considered the significance of this horrible diet. He thought of Gimp's life as a boy; how often he must have stood outside a confectionery shop window in the grimy East London slums, vowing that there would come a time when he could have his fill of those things.

John Farren thought of that and of his own college education and training in the Flying Cadet Corps. None of it had cost him much personal effort. But what a grim, superhuman determination it must have taken for this little man to hoist himself out of his obscure birthright!

John's hand was friendly on Gimp's shoulder. "Call the next man, Ep," he said. "That was a nice bit of flying you did."

Gimp fairly wriggled his joy over this compliment. "Blimey, sir, I thought fer a bit there the plyce was afire, sir. I did, sir, fer fair. But we got ter git them bombs to Jerry, sir. An' yer the man wot kin do it, sir."

John didn't like that talk of bombs and Germans. Nor the assurance that *he* would get them there. He'd see that they got through, weather permitting. Just as he always put his runs through, weather permitting. But if that cold air mass started down from the north they'd spend the night on Hamlet emergency field. To hell with this do-or-die boloney!

THEY DRONED on through the murky night, cadet replacing cadet for a spell at the wheel so that they would all have the sense of planning and piloting this trip. So that, if such a thing were possible, they might all feel the crushing weight of responsibility that rides a pilot's shoulders.

Farren tried not to help them in anything until the need was crucial. When mistakes were made in technique he laid them bare with biting sarcasm. And they didn't seem to hate him for it.

They were over Ganther at eleven thirty-two, with large breaks in the clouds. Far below they could see the small square of the intermediate field, outlined with border lights. If Malvin, the station ahead, closed in, they might still get down onto Ganther field and avoid the long trip over to Hamlet intermediate, and a cold night on that field. There was nothing at Hamlet but a small Weather Bureau shack and the beacon station.

Ted Wrightson was handling navigation. "That's a jolly good tailwind we're getting," he commented, when he presented the data sheet for John's criticism.

John nodded, worriedly. That stiff tailwind gave proof that the intense pressure up north was beginning to move.

They were at eleven thousand when John's ears picked up the sharp, jabbing signals of the Weston marker. It was getting chilly in the cab, despite the two heater vents at their feet. The de-icing fan wasn't adequate to its task of keeping the windshield free of ice that formed from the moisture of their breathing.

John had an old putty knife in his pilot bag, which he carried for this use. He scraped the front of his own glass and handed it to the cadet, so he could clear the other side.

His radio hummed with traveler wave. "Lawton, calling Farren, special section. Ganther reports light fog, increasing in density."

John acknowledged in a matter-of-fact voice. He called for Malvin's weather. The ceiling there had dropped to a thousand, with light snow.

That high pressure was on the move!

THE CADET looked at John, his ruddy English face white and strained. "Getting a bit thick, sir," he said, and waited, as though hoping Farren would deny this.

Yes, John thought, it was one of those nights. You started out with a tremendous margin of safety. Gradually that margin was whittled thinner and thinner. And as each shaving of it dropped away the pilot became more alert and tense. Minutes stretched longer and longer and yet seemed like sparks, flying from an emery wheel.

John wondered if this man, or the other cadets back of him, realized what was happening. He wondered if they could see the line that divided safe flying from reckless flying.

He figured their gas consumption. He had done these things so many thousands of times that they came automatically. They had plenty of gas to take them on into Denton, even if the Malvin field did plug up with snow. But if they passed that regular gassing station without fueling, the safety margin would be so much the thinner.

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Malvin came on the air again. "We can't get a definite ceiling here, Farren. It's moderate snow and three-quarters visibility now."

John's voice was a monotone. "Ask Skyspeed dispatch if the midnight weather map is complete yet. Relay any messages from Hamlet. I received their eleven-forty-five of high, scattered clouds but I'm afraid static might block out further messages. Go ahead."

John's words, carrying through to the cadet's headset, made the English boy's hands tighten on the control wheel. He, for one, had a pretty good idea of what was happening.

If the wind changed now, John thought, he'd have to go into the reserve fuel. But before that happened they would be on their way to the Hamlet emergency field. Always, on a night like this, there came a time when you must decide whether to go ahead or call the trip. And it took a lot more courage to run away from old man weather than to face him.

Pilots knew that and accepted it; pilots who understood their trade. But not these Englishmen. They thought a man should start out and go through, regardless. They thought that if a man had enough nerve he could fly any kind of weather.

That was what Helen Wrightson thought, too. They couldn't understand that you'd be fighting on the enemy's side by smacking a bomber into the mountains. There was a limit to the number of planes that Uncle Sam could put out; a fact that he had tried and tried to impress on their minds.

Ted Wrightson was shouting something in his ear.

"I say, old boy, he seems in bad way. Jenkins is looking him over. Jenkins has had a year of pre-medics."

"What's that? Who's in a bad way?"

"It's Gimp, sir. He's complaining, no end. It's his stomach."

Farren wanted to laugh. Here he was faced with a weather problem; a real problem; and these brave lads were in a high dither because one of their number had the colic.

"Wrap him up in a blanket," he suggested. "And don't let him hog any more of that candy junk."

The radio traveler wave hummed. "Malvin to Farren. Dispatch says weather map not completed yet. Ganther reports dense fog. Go ahead."

"Okay, Malvin. Keep me informed of Hamlet weather."

JOHN HOOKED his microphone and started scraping the windshield again. There was a thick crust of frost crystals and beneath this a layer of solid ice was forming.

He managed a small opening through this and passed his knife to the cadet.

A round, full moon had thrown itself above the cloud layer. Its platinum brilliance wiped out all but the largest stars, lighting a scene of fearful immensity; frigid loneliness. They were in the exact center of a monstrous, flattened saucer that stretched forever and ever, without end.

There was no horizon, no feeling of sky above; just the moon brooding on that limitless waste of icy nothing. The droning engines and crackling, whining radios were no longer heard as sound. The silence had a quality of eternity. Nothing had ever disturbed it, nothing ever would. Earth was but a dim memory.

The man beside him spoke to Farren, his voice awed. "I jolly well wish, sir, that I'd given more attention to your lectures. I . . . this makes a chap understand better what you were getting at."

"Want to go back, huh?"

"Chuck the trip! Oh, no. Not at all, sir." He forced a smile to his lips. "We've those bombs to drop, y'know."

Damn their bombs! These English were like a bunch of mules; room in their heads for just one idea at a time.

They crossed over Malvin and the 'Z' marker-light blazed for an instant on the dash panel. Then the reversed beacon signals crashed into Farren's ears.

"We're over your station, Malvin," he said quietly, into the microphone.

"Okay, John. No soap here. We can't see the boundary lights across the field. Want continuous beacon?"

"No. Any dope on the weather map yet?"

"Not yet. I'll call you."

There was no hint in the pilot's voice of anything out of the way. The Englishman studied his face, trying to detect some indication of worry. Farren lit a cigarette, his movements deliberate, his hands steady. He seemed to have drawn himself into a shell that excluded all thoughts except the safety of his ship and its cargo of human life.

A HALF HOUR dragged by; each minute brought them three miles nearer the broken cloud area reported over their terminal. Now, at fifteen thousand, they were skipping through buildups in the overcast. Regular as clockwork Farren called the English students to take their turns at the controls. And as each man went off watch he paused to whisper to the others, who waited back there in growing tensity.

The inside of the windshield was so badly iced now that nothing could be seen ahead. Occasionally an increased blare of static warned Farren that he must climb higher to stay above the clouds. Temperature outside was eight above, Fahrenheit; the air so dry there was small chance of wings icing.

They ran out on the Malvin beam, toward the Snake Hill marker and when they had passed that spot of sound John changed tuning to the Eaton beam station. Everything was going according to schedule. He'd plugged through far worse than this on regular runs and thought nothing of it.

Still there was that gigantic mass of cold air, whose stealthy approach might change into a wild, murdering charge.

Such things happened. A respect for those possibilities was bred into the bones of an airline pilot. Especially the old ones who had pioneered bad weather flying by trial-and-error method. One bad error canceled you out.

But there was no need for young pilots to go through that. Not if they could listen to advice and be guided by it.

John took a slow pull from his oxygen tube. They were all supposed to use that life-sustaining gas above ten thousand. The oxygen cleared his mind and lifted that horrible feeling of depression, so that he could focus his thoughts.

He had been thinking about Helen Wrightson. About her returning to England; to all the horrors that waited there. She wouldn't be afraid of that. But there was something that she did fear; a terror that lurked in her voice and in her eyes. What was it?

John called for another change of cadet pilots.

This time it was Wrightson who took the other seat.

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John could see that the cadet captain was very worried.

"What's the matter?" John asked. "Afraid you won't get to 'Potsdam' with your darned bombs?"

"It's Gimp, sir. He's blotto with that stomach ache. All doubled up."

A thought entered Farren's mind, but he dismissed it. Three years ago one of his passengers had complained of a severe stomach ache. . . .

"The little beggar's a glutton for sweets," Wrightson complained. "But good fun. He really is. It's his kind who keep us all from going completely dotty."

Wrightson fastened his safety belt, seeming to forget about Eply Gimp and the stomach ache. His eyes moved casually over the instrument board. Suddenly he made a quick, stabbing motion toward the outside temperature gauge. *Its needle pointed to fifty-eight below zero.*

The Englishman looked at Farren, as though suspecting a joke. "Why, I could see it move!" he exclaimed.

The American's face had gone tight. "It's loose!" he said. "That cold air mass is loose!"

IV

HE CHIPPED ICE from the coated windshield until there was a clean opening. "Have a look," he said grimly, to Wrightson, after he had surveyed the area ahead.

Wrightson bent forward to put his eyes near the peek-hole. The moon gave him plenty of light.

Ahead of them the clouds rose abruptly in a forbidding wall, thousands of feet high. Steep mountains of it and sheer, vertical towers, plumed into the blank sky.

There were no words to describe that tremendous, boiling maelstrom rearing its terrifying bulk athwart their course.

Wrightson sucked the thin air into his lungs, for a moment stunned by this spectacle of cosmic forces unleased. He took up his microphone: "How big . . . how high can a thing like that reach, sir!" His voice had the same awe that was mirrored in his face.

Farren shrugged: "As high as there's any air left to transmit convection currents . . . much higher than we can go with this crate."

Wrightson bent forward again, to study the piled, swirling masses of the storm.

Farren banked the ship, ruddering till the directional gyro set 290° on its lubberline. The magnetic compass swung and backed to the same reading. They had turned tail and were running away from the storm center.

"Hamlet field?" Wrightson asked.

Farren nodded. He waited for the other's comment and felt a growing anger that Wrightson had nothing to say. The Englishman was condemning him with his silence.

"Look here, Wrightson," John protested, voice unsteady with anger, "can't you see that only a fool would try to fly through such a storm?"

Wrightson's brows elevated in surprise, his eyes trying to fathom this man who was of his own race and yet was a complete enigma. "Of course I can see that, sir. It's exactly what you've been telling us for . . . well, it seems about the only thing you *have* been telling us."

It was Farren's turn to be surprised. "Then you believed me? I mean . . . you wouldn't try to fly through there yourself?"

"Well," the other considered, eyes crinkling with amusement, "I might, sir, if I went completely dotty . . . and I think most Englishmen are a bit off. It's the war, sir. I guess you don't quite understand."

No, John thought; he didn't understand. But at least he was beginning to realize that in some way he had misjudged these men's attitude toward him. Suddenly, impulsively, he voiced the question that had been troubling him. "Is Helen . . . I mean, does your sister plan going back to England with you?"

Wrightson gave him a quick, understanding look. "Yes," he nodded. "Ambulance service. Raid victims, y'know."

Farren wanted to protest against the other's cold-blooded attitude toward his sister. Wrightson was taking her back, through the menace of German submarines and to that greater danger that shrouded England! Civilians were being slaughtered like cattle to satisfy the hate of the Nazis.

Yes, she would go back. She had courage, lots of it. Courage was a thing that her nation worshiped above all else in this time of crisis.

John leaned forward, tuning in the Hamlet radio beam station. Courage wasn't everything in a war, any more than it was in ordinary flying.

The door, leading back into the cabin, opened and Cadet Jenkins stood there for a moment, gazing at the ice-crusted windshield. His shout came above the grind of the two engines.

"I think Cadet Gimp is going to die, sir."

JOHN'S MIND swerved instantly to that other man who had ridden his ship, three years ago. He, too, had complained of a stomachache. "Appendicitis?"

Jenkins nodded. "It may have burst. He's hardly breathing at all, sir."

A feeling of utter helplessness gripped Farren's mind. Jenkins was waiting for him to say something.

It would take an hour or so to reach Hamlet field. But after they got there . . . what then?

"He refused to take oxygen," Jenkins whispered. "Now he can't take it. Unconscious."

John was calling Hamlet station. Static blocked him out on the shortwave. Malvin picked him up, relayed him to the emergency field. One of the men at Hamlet owned a car, they reported. But the field had been snowbound for the last week.

"There's nothing at Hamlet, even when we get there," John said to Jenkins and Wrightson. "Why in blazes did I ever let him make the trip! He was sick this morning."

"You didn't know it was serious," Wrightson protested. "It's not your fault, old man."

Farren pounded the control wheel with his gloved hand. "Anything that happens on his ship is the pilot's fault! Don't you know that? It's our fault when the beams go haywire; when the engines quit turning over. . . !" He stopped, hopelessly.

"If we could only get him to take oxygen!" Jenkins fretted.

"Shove the mouthpiece into his face. Hold his lips tight around it; pinch his nose shut."

"Righto." Jenkins turned back into the cabin.

But oxygen wouldn't cure a burst appendix. There was only one thing to cure that—a surgeon's knife.

Farren was busy for a time, planning things; holding back the urgency to act and act immediately.

His memory held a vivid picture of all this terrain,

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now screened by the three miles of cloud layer beneath them. The Hamlet and Eaton beams intersected over flat, clear farmland that was well populated. A half-mile walk, at the most, would take a man to the nearest farm. They would be all right, even though it was snowing.

Farren banked the ship for a hundred-eighty degree turn. He corrected the 110° course for windage.

"What's up?" Wrightson demanded.

John switched his mike to interphone circuit: "All of you men," he said, "have parachutes and know how to use 'em. I'm flying Gimp into Denton. Anyway, I'm going to try. I'll spot you fellows over good territory, so you can bail out."

A startled silence followed this announcement.

"Look here, old man. . . !" Wrightson protested.

"No arguments," John interrupted. "I'm takin' this crate into damned bad weather, with a good chance of crashing it. No need of killing the rest of you."

He looked toward Wrightson for acknowledgment of the good sense in this arrangement. But Wrightson was shaking his head. And what Wrightson thought, the others would also think.

In desperation, John's mind reverted to his old line of reasoning. "I don't need you birds with me," he growled. "I can fly these crates alone. I've done it. And each one of you guys is worth fifteen thousand bucks—what it cost to train you."

Wrightson looked at him in a queer fashion. "Sorry, old boy."

John inwardly cursed their stubbornness, but knew better than to argue with them. "All right, you lads," he said bitterly, "get yourselves set for a ride."

THEY PICKED UP the Eaton radio-range beacon and John changed course to center its beam. Now that he had made up his mind he had a queer feeling of elation. It was a relief to throw away all the old habits of caution; to go out and fight the weather, with naked hands and wits.

The path of the beam was narrowing. It was a tenuous thread of sound; it was like walking a tight-rope to stay on it. He switched to the loop circuit. Two minutes later the 'Z' light flashed on his panel and he swung course to the Benard range.

The inner coating of ice on the windshield was steely hard now, almost a part of the glass. He had difficulty chipping a hole in this large enough to see.

Wrightson spoke into his microphone: "We'll have to fly through it on instruments?"

John nodded. "Can't get above the stuff."

The plane lifted suddenly and went *wham*, down on a convection blast that was hard as rock. John's microphone jerked from his hand, cutting a red gash up his cheek.

Static blasted unbearably in the earphones. Wrightson cut the volume until they could just hear the thin whine of the Benard station.

There was a sort of wild, carefree gaiety in Farren's shout: "Put full heat to the intakes, Wrightson. Open the oil valve to the propeller slinger-rings and start the wing boots."

The mouthpiece on Wrightson's oxygen tube splintered under the quick, tight grip of his teeth. That order of Farren's meant that they were heading into ice; into clouds that were heavy with moisture, that would sheathe their plane with its cold steel.

Farren had warned them about icing and Wrightson had heard other pilots talk of its danger. How it would pile up, layer on layer, its weight dragging downward, its coat deforming the shape of the wings, destroying their lifting power, throwing the plane out of balance.

John Farren's voice lashed the Englishman. "Did you hear me! Look alive on those valves!"

Wrightson's hands fumbled with the hot air levers, and with the valve that controlled oil; oil that would coat the propeller blades to keep ice from clinging to them. He opened the valve that sent air in throbbing blasts to the wide strips of rubber covering leading edges of the airplane wings.

With engines thundering their defiance, and with a wide, hard grin showing clenched teeth, John Farren sent his big craft into the mauling guts of the storm.

Wrightson looked, with an expression of shocked wonder, at the American. It didn't seem possible that this was the same man who, day after day, had lectured to them on the cost of bombers and on the need of playing safe. John Farren was crazily enjoying this death struggle with the storm!

There wasn't a doubt of that. He was actually smiling; the savage scorn of a man who knows the odds against him and doesn't care. That was the way the R. A. F. boys must have smiled when they battled those tremendous odds to smash the Jerries' air control at Dunkerque.

Farren had snapped off the radio. Small wonder! No beacon signal could come through that blaring thunder of static.

The plane seemed to stand still for a moment, like a frightened animal on the brink of a precipice. The engines' thunder increased, as though their propellers were whirling in a complete vacuum.

Farren jerked the throttles; held the nose high, stalling. The automatic signal blared a warning that the wheels were still retracted. And then they started to drop!

VI

WRIGHTSON FELT his body straining against the safety belt. Without that to hold him down he would have been thrown clear through the skylight escape hatch.

They weren't only dropping of their own weight . . . they were being literally sucked down by the maelstrom of the storm!

The climb indicator flipped to a thousand-foot-per-minute ascent, with its inertia lag. Then, swiftly, it moved to a thousand foot, fifteen hundred, two-thousand-foot descent. The Englishman watched it with the fascination of horror, while the other man fought grimly with his controls.

Wrightson knew by heart the contour maps of this region south of Eaton. It was a tumbled mass of rocky peaks and deep, narrow gorges. Some of those mountains reached the twelve-thousand level!

The hundred-foot indicator of the sensitive altimeter was like a sweep second hand on a clock, so fast did it count off the diminishing height. And yet Wrightson knew that it was behind in recording their actual loss in altitude.

Farren still held the nose of the plane high. They were stalling! They were still holding a bare flying speed. The altimeter showed thirteen thousand and racing the dial. They were below the level of the surrounding mountains!

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Farren must be crazy, not to try and climb the plane! Wrightson wanted to shout that at the top of his voice. He did open his mouth for this. But no words would come! Cold fingers seemed to grip his throat, paralyze it.

And they they struck the updraft!

Wrightson blacked-out, blood drained from his upper body, from his brain. It was as though a dark gray curtain had been jerked down over his eyes.

His body was jammed unmercifully against the hard cushion of his parachute. It seemed impossible that anything built by man could stand that terrific punishment!

The plane shuddered under the impact. And then they were going up and up.

Wrightson's brain cleared. A thought flashed across his mind. *What if they had been going full speed when they struck that updraft?*

The plane would have lost its wings. There was the only answer to that question.

Wrightson looked at the man beside him, whose lips were still parted in that grim, mirthless, fighting smile. He felt the urgent need to say something, somehow to convey to the other his complete understanding of those lectures Farren had been giving them.

They had branded Farren with cowardice. The whole class had sneered at his Yankee thrift when he dwelt too much on the cost of bombers.

These Yankees were a strange people; hard and sharp in their dealings with others, seeming to worship their dollar. One moment they appeared so, at least—and the next they were engaged in some quixotic adventure so tremendous in scope as to stagger the imagination. Shylocks in the morning and by afternoon giving away food and clothing to the whole world.

A yellow light flashed on the instrument panel. For the life of him, Wrightson couldn't think what—

Farren's hand darted across to the other side, as both of the engines started to cough and backfire into their blower sections. He turned the gas selector valve to *reserve*. "The wobble pump!" Farren shouted. "Get busy on that auxiliary gas pump, you damned dummy!"

THE ENGINES went completely dead. Farren jammed the wheel forward to keep them windmilling. A blast of air threw the ship up onto the port wing. Farren's reaching hand missed the auxiliary pump handle.

Wrightson jerked the handle rapidly up and down. But still his mind had a queer reluctance to be concerned in this emergency. It was leading him back to a pleasantly detached musing, when Farren's voice sounded, harsh and commanding, on the interphone. "Shove that oxygen tube into your mug! Start puffing or you'll go completely out!"

Wrightson felt the splintered mouthpiece shoved against his teeth. Automatically he sucked in. Dark shadows receded in his mind, as though a light had been turned on there. Of course! Once a man started using oxygen the need for it was greater. Farren had warned them of that. And he had warned them that they must start puffing below ten thousand or their starved brains might never warn them that they were going out.

Queer, the many things Farren had told them that hadn't properly registered in their minds. It was because he had started most of his lectures with that bloody rot about the cost of bombers. Something had to be done about that. This man knew too much to have his wisdom thrown away.

The engines caught on a fresh flow from the reserve tank. Without being conscious of it, Wrightson still labored at the wobble pump.

Farren put out a restraining hand. "Enough!" he shouted, smiling. With the same movement of his hand, he increased the longwave volume.

Static again crashed and howled in the earphones. Through that confusing jumble of sound came a thin wail, throbbing and as distant as the stars: *dash-dot . . . dash-dot . . . dash-dot. . .*

It was there but a moment before the voltage of the storm rode over it with the steel-shod wheels of a thousand chariots. They were on the 'N' side of the beam.

Farren swung forty degrees on the directional gyro.

The wind velocity of this storm must be terrific! Wrightson tried to estimate it, from the amount of drift correction Farren had made. But his mind, unaccustomed to the unearthly gales of high altitude, refused to accept the figures.

The ship still wallowed and pitched in the rough air. But it was nothing compared to that wild ride when they first hit the storm.

Wrightson said, over the interphone: "Small wonder you wanted us to bail out. I'd hazard you almost lost two hundred thousand dollars' worth of pilots on that first bump."

Immediately he regretted the joke. Farren's eyes narrowed with anger: "You're not out of the woods yet, sonny boy," the Yankee snarled.

A moment later the storm again took them into its giant, merciless grip.

This was far worse than the first had been. The movement was quicker, shorter and more violent. There were no more of the hideous drops into space. It was as though the storm, having tried those tactics and failed, was bent on proving to them that there was no end to its hideous bag of tricks.

One time, Wrightson was certain, they were clear over on her back. Farren's shout came to him, harsh with its urgency: "Help me on the right rudder!" He was low in his seat, braced to give the last ounce of strength to his right leg.

Wrightson added his own strength to the right pedal and felt it give a little.

Another time, he was startled to see that the perspiration stood out in crystal drops on Farren's brow. And yet the control cab temperature was far below the freezing point!

WRIGHTSON'S eyes followed the other's wide, fixed concentration on the blind-flying instruments. He saw then that the Artificial Horizon, a gyroscopic instrument, had been thrown off its gimbal balance by the jolting plane.

Farren had warned them that that could happen. A pilot, he had maintained, could get into air so rough that all of his blind-flying instruments would go haywire. They had scoffed at that, among themselves.

The Englishman tried to remember the procedure Farren had told them to use in that desperate case. But the knowledge that might save his life was gone; buried under the antagonism they all had had for this man.

The yellow, radium-treated 'horizon' bar was making aimless loops and quarterings over the blue scrowl of the instrument. It had gone completely whacky.

The plane bucked and twisted, exactly like a wild horse that fought against the outrage of a saddle.

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Wrightson's senses were in the grip of vertigo. He was certain that the plane was climbing. The nose was too high! And now it was in a left turn. They would stall off into a spin!

The sense of that was so clear that he wondered Farren didn't corect his fatal error before it was too late.

Farren didn't know what the plane was doing! He couldn't know! Even with the windshield clear of that thick coating of ice, he wouldn't be able to see anything in the clouds, that would give him a sense of balance.

The instruments were all haywire now. Their readings contradicted each other.

Haywire! He remembered now! Farren had told them the probable sequence of instrument failure. The turn-bank instrument. That was the most reliable. And if the turn needle started jumping from side-to-side, then the bank ball alone, give the ship her own way as much as possible, trying to get some idea of direction from the magnetic compass, if it didn't whirl too badly.

Yes, and Farren had mentioned that that was a good time to start singing *Nearer My God To Thee*. Rum sense of humor, these Yanks had!

They were down to six thousand now.

Wrightson wondered how it would feel when they struck.

VII

HE RECALLED that time, years ago—his father returning from the hunt; his father's shouted warning to keep clear of the horse's hoofs. The quick movement of the nervous animal. And then . . . it seemed as though something had leaped on him, jerked him ruthlessly into a deep, dark hole.

That was probably how it would feel. Only this time there would be not the slightest warning. Just . . . just complete oblivion.

The monotonous wail of the beacon range filled his ears, mounting to crescendo, breaking off; dead silence; then blaring forth again, the 'N' and 'A' reversed.

Farren's voice was on the interphone: "One of you guys back there . . . bring up a jacket or flying coat. And the fire extinguisher. Make it snappy!"

There was hardly a ripple in the air. It was that sudden. One moment the storm was cuffing them about like some brawling giant. The next moment it was over.

It was gone. It was a thing of the memory; something that you would speak of seldom and then only casually. For no one would ever believe it. And they might think you were boasting.

But you would cling to the memory. You would never want to forget it. A man's life is made up of such things. So very few! Perhaps a score of them in a whole life time . . . but the things that were worth remembering, the climaxes of existence.

The instrument board had returned to normal. Somehow they had gotten through. Well, that was that, and a jolly, ripping time they'd had of it for a while.

They had crossed the Benard station. A few minutes and they would be in Denton, where there were broken clouds.

Cadet Wade handed Farren a fleece-lined macinaw and the two-quart fire extinguisher. He stepped back and Jenkins took his place. Jenkins must have bitten into his lip. There was a trickle of blood from the corner of his mouth. And he nursed his left arm against his chest with the right.

"The little blighter's been conscious for the last ten or fifteen minutes, sir. I've been thinking. Y'see, he wouldn't take oxygen . . . bad stomach, poison collecting in his bloodstream, nothing to burn it out. What I mean is, oxygen. . . ."

"Yeah," Farren interrupted "But it's more'n a stomach ache, I'm bettin'. What's the matter with your arm?"

"Well . . . it was a bit rough back there, sir."

"For the lova Pete! You got your arm busted . . . feedin' oxygen to that little nut!"

Jenkins was embarrassed. "It scarcely hurts at all, sir. Bit of a sprain, p'rhaps."

"Sprain my eye! Go back there and sit down." The Yank probably wasn't aware of it, but he was still shouting, talking to himself, holding the coat up against the side window. "Of all the crazy lugs in the world," he shouted, angrily, "I'll lay my dough on these damned fool Englishmen!"

He swung the fire extinguisher back and crashed it end-o through the side window.

A blast of wind almost snatched the shielding coat from his hands. Farren threw the coat back of him, into the cabin.

Cloud vapor bunched the red glow of their port navigation light, seen through the broken window.

Farren took up his microphone, switched to outside transmission: "Farren, special section, three minutes from the field; what's your weather, Denton?"

"Denton to Farren: Broken clouds, forty-five hundred; visibility unlimited; west-sou'-west 15. Hold off for westbound section of Skyspeed. How's weather over the hump, John?"

Farren's voice was casual: "A little rough. Tell Skyspeed no go. I'll talk to the pilot when I get down."

Farren sat back in his seat, yawning. Both he and Wrightson were uneasily aware of each other's presence; ashamed perhaps that their thoughts had taken them into queer corners of speculation during this trip. "Well," Farren said, almost sneering, "here's Potsdam. Better get your bombs ready."

"Righto," the Englishman agreed, in dead seriousness. "The munitions factory is southwest of the city; coordinates L-18. What would you call the wind, sir?"

. . . Helen Wrightson led the way out onto the veranda of Hostess House, John following. He didn't have to walk. The words that were in his mind carried him along without any personal effort. They fitted nicely to the orchestra music. *Three dances in a row; she gave me three dances in a row. . . !* Didn't they rhyme beautifully?

Then suddenly they stopped rhyming. And the music lost its magic and became a dead repetition of colorless noise. "I hear you're going back to England, Miss Wrightson," John said.

Her evening gown was blue. Not the color of her eyes, exactly. Nothing could match them. She seemed taller than she ever had before. That was because he had never seen her in high-heeled slippers. Why in thunder did English women wear low-heeled shoes and otherwise strive their level best to appear dowdy?

He was trying to figure out other good reasons for fault finding. But she smiled, and that stopped that.

"How d'you like our dance?" she asked. "This was what we were all planning for the American instructors . . . that day we didn't invite you to the tea."

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She moved nearer him. Her voice dropped to a husky note. "You wouldn't ever, ever guess that your horrid English cousins could be grateful, would you? I don't suppose I should tell you. It's such a deep, dreadful secret. But we are, John. We're grateful that you are giving each of our boys fifteen thousand dollars' worth of flying instruction. And grateful for the many other things."

"Now look here, Helen," John protested. "I just said fifteen thousand dollars . . . well, how in thunderation can a man better impress on them the value of their lives! The fools don't seem to be born with that knowledge."

"I know. I understand, John. But don't you realize the fear that we have. The terrible urge that is in us to kill that thing . . . that grinning pestilence that is Nazism. It isn't bodily fear, John. It . . ." her voice broke. "John, it's the terrible fear that, like so many of the French, we may be starved and scourged into embracing that monster. It's . . . it's . . ." Her voice ended in a shudder of horror.

John's arms were around her. To both of them it seemed the most natural thing in the world.

The only complaint John had, was that she didn't stay there long enough. "Well, just fancy this!" she exclaimed, stepping back, smoothing her hair. "Hi go fer a bit o' a stroll wi' bloke, an' the first thin' hi know ee's a kissin' me fyce an' me. . . ."

"And kissing your mouth, too, you perishin' little cockney," John said, demonstrating. "And you're *not* going back to England."

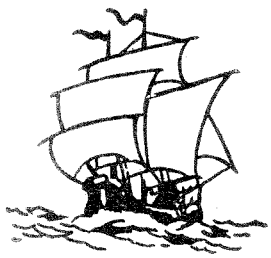
"No," she agreed. "My jolly young brother put his foot down on that. I've got a job here, he said, that is far more important than driving an ambulance. He told me all about that trip you had the other night. He's no end puzzled himself. But he says I've got to stay here and try to explain the other boys, who come later, to you Yanks. Yes, and explain you blasted Yanks to the English boys. A sort of an interpreter. Y'see?"

But John couldn't see anything, except her lips.

"D'you suppose," she suggested, a little later, "that you could propose to a girl?"

John wasn't sure just how a Yank should propose to an English girl, but: "If it's gotta be done," he agreed, "it's gotta be done."

"That," she stated, "wins you a wife. Yes," she added, thoughtfully, "and I think that the way you all feel like that—if it's gotta be done—well, that's a kind of battle-cry to free the whole world."



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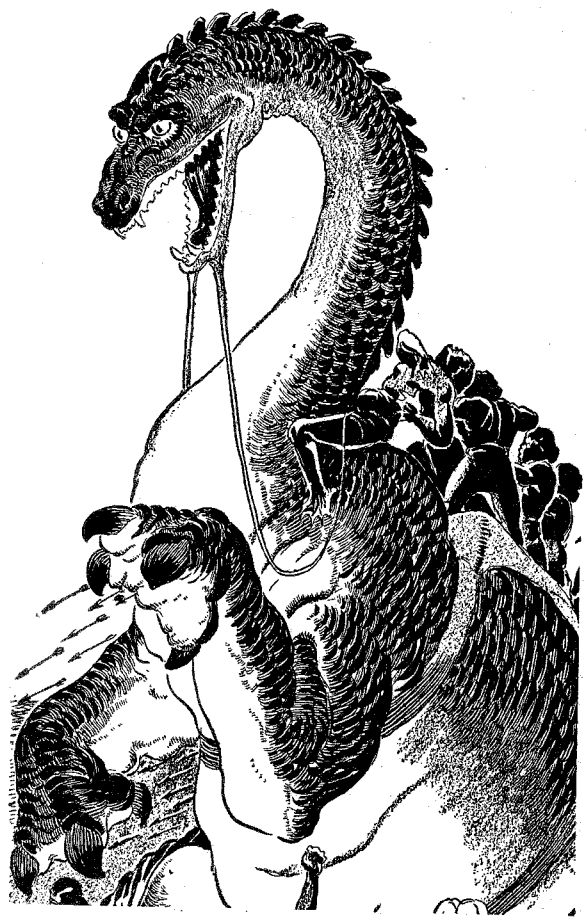

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"Don't!" I yelled. It was too late. Larch knocked him flat and brown men came swarming at us

Golden Quest

Far in the hidden depths of Burma lives a woman worth her weight in gold. She is still there, because of what happened to the only whites who ever caught so much as a glimpse of her

By Hal G. Evarts

Author of "Colonel Coolie," etc.

I TOLD THIS story once before, and swore I'd never tell it again. Nobody believed me then, and you won't either, but it doesn't matter. Not that I'm likely to forget the thing; I won't. I want to get it down in black and white, that's all.

For years I've been taking rich tourists on hunting parties in the bush. It's a pleasant way to make a living, and you meet all kinds of people. Some of them are bores and some are eccentrics, but all of them have plenty of money. That's why I was surprised the afternoon a runner from the Hotel Splendide brought me a note.

It was between seasons and I was marking time at the Rangoon Trophy Club. Well, from there to Hotel Splendide is the distance from Park Avenue to the Bowery.

If you want to pick up some loose cash follow this runner, the message read. There was no signature. Right then I was prepared to dislike whoever wrote it, but, like most everybody, I like cash; so I followed.

The Splendide is a dilapidated building submerged by banyans and cocoa palms. I walked into the lobby. It was full of the usual barflys: grubby men with their Eurasian girls and painted Burmese dolls. I know the breed and they're no customers of mine.

I climbed to the second floor and padded along a dingy hall to a certain room number. Inside I heard two people talking. As soon as I knocked the talking stopped and I heard footsteps. When everything was quiet the door creaked open.

A sallow, sleek-haired man of about thirty stuck his head out. "Bradley Fulton?" he asked in a rasping voice. After I stepped in he locked the door again.

I took my time sizing him up. He wore a dirty white suit and a frayed shirt. His pallid face was smeared with black beard stubble. "You want some shooting?" I said.

"Hell no! I want some guiding." He had shrewd eyes set too close together, and an O of a mouth that contracted like a rubber ball. "And I hear you're tops."

I glanced around the room. In one corner I noticed two trunks plastered with hotel labels. "That depends," I said, "on what you're looking for."

He handed me a calling card. I read *Professor Edward*

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Larch, and handed it back. Anybody can have a card printed. He stepped to a door leading out to the veranda and closed it. He pulled down the window shades tight. "How'd you like to hunt for me?" he said. "Man hunt."

I must have jumped a foot, because he was laughing. He had a disagreeable, irritating laugh that brought the blood pounding into my head. "That's a bit out of my line," I said.

"Is it?" He pulled a wallet out of his coat pocket. When the coat flipped back I got a look at the shoulder holster under his left arm. It cradled an automatic. "We'll call this your retaining fee," he said, and slapped a hundred dollar bill on the table.

IN MY TIME I've been offered money for everything from poaching to gun running, but nothing like this. I was curious, mainly. "Fee for what?" I said.

"You know the country and the lingo. They say you talk better than the natives themselves."

He'd investigated my record all right. I'd learned Burmese before English, and knocking about as a kid I picked up Shan, Karen and half a dozen other dialects. "I've been around some," I said. I wasn't being modest; it's a country larger than Texas, and only half explored. Any man who claims to know Burma is a liar or a fool.

"You'll do," Larch said. "You'll do. Know when to keep your mouth shut." I let him get me a chair and pour me a drink. "Now," he said, "do you know a tribe called the Gong-do?"

I told him no. If I had a rupee for every tribe between the Mekong and the Chindwin I wouldn't have been there listening to him. "Good," he said. "If an expert like you don't know about it, then nobody does." He gave me a crooked grin.

I waited. "But I know about this tribe, see? I take you to the jumping off place, and you take me the rest of the way—to their village." He shoved the bill at me.

I could use a hundred dollars. But we guides have an ethical code, the same as any profession. That may sound peculiar from a man whose trade is killing, but it's true all the same. "What's the object of the trip?" I said.

The grin flickered off. "That's my business. All you have to do is find the place."

"Nothing doing." I set down my glass. I knew for sure I didn't like Larch, nor the setup. I want to know where I'm going, and why. "I'd have to get the necessary permits from the British authorities."

"The authorities won't be interested." His eyes bored into mine. "A century for you now and five more if you locate it."

He peeled off some more bills. I edged around the table to put it between us. I didn't answer.

"Stubborn, huh?" He broke into a chuckle. "Maybe you better talk to my partner." I braced myself against the wall, prepared for trouble. "Jean!" he called.

All my life I've studied animals, human and otherwise, and the woman who strode in from the veranda was a superb specimen. She carried herself with the poise of one of our native water bearers, yet there was a cat lithe-ness to her movements. Her muscular control was so perfect it was abnormal.

"Miss Duval," Larch introduced. "Also my protegé." When she shook hands I felt the strength of her grip; it was like part of her personality. She wasn't pretty. Her face was too strong, on the haughty side. Her gray eyes and ash blond hair and everything about her indicated a core of reserve.

"Fulton here," he said, "wants to meet you." He reached for the knob. "Look after him a minute, baby. I'll be right back." He slipped out the door and closed it.

I TURNED to the girl. She wore no makeup, and looked at neat as Larch did down-at-the-heels. "What are you supposed to be—my guard?" I said.

She shook her head.

There was an uncomfortable pause. "Are you going on this—this expedition too?"

"Yes." She measured me with a stare and moved away. I followed her onto the balcony and leaned against the railing. Some coolies were humming in the garden and a moon tipped over the trees, outlining distant Shwe Dagan. Her stiffness formed a sharp contrast to the ripe tropic backdrop.

"You might as well know," she said abruptly. "I'm supposed to be the feature attraction—the lure you'd call it." In the light her features were as hard as refined bronze.

"I don't get it," I said.

"Don't you? We thought you'd balk. Eddy arranged this little interlude so I can persuade you. My job is to charm you into helping us."

I traced a rickshaw lantern jiggling in the road while I considered that one. "Listen, Miss Duval," I said. "I don't know you; you don't know me. But if you're in trouble, maybe I can help you. Why don't you tell me what this business is all about?"

"I'm not in trouble. If you're sufficiently fascinated by my company, consider yourself hired. If not—" She shrugged. Her voice was as perfectly controlled as her body; you couldn't tell what she was feeling or thinking.

"That's frank enough," I said. "Only I don't do business that way."

"It's Eddy's idea, not mine."

"It's a pretty cold-blooded proposition."

"Eddy's a pretty cold-blooded person," she said. And after a pause, "So am I."

I didn't doubt that. I'm not much of a hand around women, and with one like that you don't make idle conversation. She just stood there, not moving or speaking. "Well, goodnight," I blurted. She didn't even turn around.

NEXT MORNING at the Trophy Club I combed the official Burma *Gazetteer,* which lists every known tribe and offshoot in nether India. There was no mention of Gong-do. I quizzed several old gaffers. I asked a friend at Government House. No one knew of a tribe by that name.

Afterward I phoned the American Consulate for the list of passport entry registrations. I learned that a Mr. Larch and a Miss Duval had arrived two weeks before. Both had given their occupation as "entertainer."

Packing was simple. I took a toothbrush and my .45 revolver. I found them in the courtyard of the Splendide, stowing camping gear in a station wagon. "I changed my mind," I told them.

The girl said exactly nothing. Larch said, "I thought you might." He didn't volunteer any information until the car was loaded and ready to leave. Then he asked, "You know the road to Loimu?"

I nodded. Loimu is one of the most isolated outposts in Burma. It borders administered territory, which means territory too wild and backward to be governed at all. "His Majesty's Government cannot assume responsibility for persons entering this region," is how the Britishers put it. Old timers call it "the corner."

The highway to Mandalay runs through a flat lowland. Now and then we caught a glimpse of the Irriwaddi and thatched hovels beside the river on stilts. White pagodas whizzed by like mileposts. At first I pointed out the sights, as I always do for my parties, but after a while Larch said, "Don't bother—it isn't a Cook's tour."

He was in a hurry. We stopped at a *dak* long enough

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for dinner and drove all night. The following noon I turned at a junction branching into Kalaw Hills. We climbed through an open country of grass and pines and caught up with the mango rains. For the last three days we slithered and churned our way over a bullock track.

Larch was rigid with excitement the evening we wheeled into Loimu. He was breathing hard and his eyes darted from hut to hut along the only street. In front of a Hindu grain store he ordered me to stop, and climbed down. I parked by the rest house, situated on a knoll overlooking the village.

The rain had let up, and we had a clear view of the valley. Everything was wilderness beyond. "The pot of gold's out there somewhere," the girl said. She said it just like that too, as though we'd been discussing pots of gold right along.

"Well, if that's what you're after," I said, "you won't need me." The earth smelled richly moist, and a *pauk* tree behind the bungalow had put forth its first orange flower. A *minah* bird was scolding from a bamboo thicket.

She laughed for the first time, a soft throaty laugh. With the tightness gone from her face she seemed young—young as a schoolgirl. "Why did you come, really?" she asked suddenly. "You're running a risk, you know that?"

"Yes, I know that." I was a fool to come after she'd warned me. She didn't belong to my world; she belonged to Eddy Larch. I knew that too. "Call it a hunch," I told her.

"You think we'll find the tribe then?" she said eagerly.

Her eyes were honest. It was no use lying. "I don't believe it exists," I said. "But if you want it that bad I hope I'm wrong."

AS DUSK deepened into dark we sat on the porch waiting for Larch and I talked about the only thing I know—Burma. I told her about some of the strange things I'd seen—deer that bark like dogs, birds that sleep on their backs, and men who paddle canoes with their legs. "It's a funny country," I said. "Almost anything's possible here."

"Anything," she repeated. "Anything's possible here. It sounds fantastic, make believe." Her hand touched my arm. "You love this place, don't you? And your work?"

"It's more like play for me," I said. And then I remembered the description on her passport. It didn't make sense. "But what about you?"

In an instant her mouth hardened to a thin taut line. "Me?" the word jerked out. "Me? I worked since I was five years old, seven days a week. What I want is money. Money for clothes and diamonds and a big house and a trip to Florida every winter. What every woman wants! Money—Oh, let's skip it!" She laughed, bitterly this time.

"Money?" That didn't make sense either. Not in "the corner."

"Sure, money. Why not?" Larch tramped up with two coolies. Each dumped a sack of rice on the floor. "These, my friend," he said, "are going to make our fame and fortune."

I thought it was a joke. I looked from one to the other. "I gotta tell him sometime, baby." Jean looked at her feet.

"See," Larch said, "in the trade they call me the Professor—Professor Larch's Travelling Museum. That's me. I manage the elephant-skin woman an' the three-legged baby and a lotta others. So when my troupe opens in Rangoon for a run I take a local snake charmer—native. Jean's nice to him, so he tells her about a tribe that makes my show look like nothing.

"Okay. According to this swami no white man's yet laid eyes on a Gong-do, because there's just one place they hang out and it's hard to get at. Only a few black hillbillies know about the place, and now us three here. That's your job—to guide us there."

He passed me a sheet of paper. It was a charcoal sketch of a native. There was no hair on the head except for a luxurious growth of bleached sideburns, that, for some reason, reminded me of a pair of white powder puffs.

"That's what the men are like," Larch explained. "But the women! Our snake charmer friend says they got heads of solid gold. Solid gold! Think of it!"

I shifted uneasily. I wanted to laugh, but he was dead earnest. It was like something out of the Sunday supplements. "The idea then," I said, "is to buy one of these—these walking banks for your troupe?" It was fantastic, even for Burma. "Mildly speaking," I told him, "you're crazy, man."

"So was P. T. Barnum. But he made a million." Larch kept on talking, spieling like a sideshow barker.

I didn't argue. The thing was absurd, impossible, yet he believed in it. The girl, Jean, she believed it too. She was putting her faith in some fakir's tale. My instinct was to pity her, only I knew she would resent it, savagely.

"All right," I said. "We're all crazy. I'll see you through."

I COULDN'T fathom her. In front of Larch she hardly spoke a word. When he turned in for the night I made some pretext to stay up, because I wanted another chat with her alone. I was still curious.

I took out my revolver and checked the mechanism. I cleaned the barrel and emptied the chamber. I had to keep my hands busy in the face of that stubborn silence. A lizard scurried over the ceiling.

"You don't have to do this for me," she said finally. "You can change your mind again, you know."

"A deal's a deal."

"Meaning what?" she said.

The chirrup of crickets outside was suddenly loud in my ears. "Meaning"—I hesitated—"meaning that you didn't finish your story. Aren't you an entertainer too?"

"And what's that to you?" She stepped up fiercely, her knuckles clenched white. "Entertainment isn't part of the deal!"

"Oh yes it is!" I grabbed her shoulders and kissed her. She didn't resist; she didn't push me away. I might have been kissing a marble statue.

. . . The region beyond Loimu is marked on the map with blank spots and vague dotted lines. The Gong-do village, if there was one, lay due south, somewhere in an area of a hundred thousand square miles. It was a needle in a haystack, but there was one lead:

Most people settle near water. The marauding tribes of upper Burma prefer high saddles for protection instead. For that reason our only chance lay along the ridges.

The first day we worked across the valley through dense jungle. It was good to be out once more, jigging along in the lead, with Jean right behind. It was good to think of her, with something wanting to sing inside me. I didn't worry about any woman with a head of gold.

We stumbled across a faint trail that wound up through a stand of teak. It climbed above the vegetation belt to a slope and dropped on the opposite side. I stopped at the summit to study the terrain through my glasses. By guess I made a sketch map, penciling in the high contours. It was the last trail we crossed.

From there on it was heat and flies and forced marches and jackals at night. It was dry camps and cramped muscles and nerves under strain. But mostly it was the bush, the "blue," ready to leap out like a crouching beast and drag you down. You couldn't ignore it.

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Along the skyline we plodded south, halting to examine the side canyons and draws. The country was up-and-down, hard on men and horses, but Larch pushed on at top speed. Every day it got more exhausting.

IN THE few villages we passed we learned nothing about the Gong-do. The entire population, sullen and suspicious, would turn out for our arrival, eye the caravan greedily and refuse to answer any questions. Larch, though, was optimistic because the farther we went the more heavily the women were disfigured—split nostrils, cut ear lobes and the like.

Then we saw no sign of human life at all. We shoved on blindly, holding the same general direction from one chain of ridges to the next. On top it was all crumbling rock and dust and scrub thorn, while below, a sea of blue tree tops unrolled to infinity. It was desolate, isolated, like no country I'd hunted before.

One afternoon I spotted a column of smoke. Larch booted into a gallop, and we plunged after him, dodging boulders and brush. A few minutes later we burst over the lip of a shallow sag.

A dozen odd huts huddled in the shade, enclosed by a stockade of dried mud and brambles. A ditch, imbedded with pickets, encircled the whole thing. A single narrow bridge and gate gave entrance. On both sides the razor-back dropped away steeply to the jungle.

There was no movement or noise. The center square was deserted, and the customary dogs were gone. Even the smoke had disappeared. There was only an eerie quiet.

"Wait," I said. "It may be a trap."

But Larch raced down the hill into the village. There was nothing to do but follow. He swung off his horse in front of the largest dwelling and climbed a ladder to the platform. A native squeezed out from the dark interior, blocking the doorway.

"Don't!" I yelled. It was too late. Larch knocked him flat.

The compound swarmed with little brown men. They came charging from everywhere, hemming us in. Five feet away they stopped. They didn't touch us, not even Larch. They stood, waiting, with paddy knives in their hands.

"Look at them!"

I did. They were short, with the deep chests and knotty calves of mountain men. Their skulls were cropped except for patches of bleached sideburns that looked like powder puffs. "Greetings," I stammered in the Shan language.

They regarded me without comprehension. The circle edged closer into a tight ring. The faces were devoid of expression. "We are your friends," I tried in Red Karen. Again a dead silence.

I knew they were undecided. A word, a gesture would turn the balance either way in their minds. That was the situation we'd walked into. Call it luck if you want. Desperately I ran through the tonal variations, hoping to break through. Restless feet shuffled in the dirt and inched forward.

"Don't they understand?" I'd forgotten Jean. She was staring at the crowd, through it, as though they were so many wooden dummies.

"We've got to make them understand!" My forehead was wet with sweat. "They've never seen whites before. They think we're freaks." I held out a cigarette to the nearest one. He hopped back and a murmur ran through the square. He pointed at Jean.

Her arms were twined around her head like rubber, once, and half again, so that her hands locked. She leaned forward, brushing her head on the ground, and forced it back and up until I thought her spine would snap.

I WAS speechless. It was more than a contortion stunt; she tied her body in knots. The men gasped, and retreated.

She was on her stomach next, her legs drooping forward in a semicircle. She seized a foot in each hand and began to roll around the village like a wheel, slowly at first, then faster and faster. Every time her head came up I could see her smile. It was fascinating, and somehow horrible.

She stopped at a full split, and sprang to her feet effortlessly. A hum went up from the crowd. Here and there a face expanded into an astonished grin, and they were all laughing and talking at once. "I'm a little rusty, professor," she said, "but the show must go on."

An old man stepped out. He rubbed a finger on her arm and examined it. There was a general guffaw. "Why don't you introduce us?" Jean said. "Tell him I'm the India Rubber Girl, the limber lass from Indianapolis."

The old man sheathed his knife. "Welcome," he began in Shan. "We thought you meant us harm. But the woman—?" He looked at her quizzically.

"Step right up, ladeez and gen'lemum, for one thin dime. See her twist and turn. Between the bearded lady and the fattest woman in the world. Tell him I *am* a freak. He'll understand that!"

The headman barked an order and the tribesmen dispersed. I took a deep breath. I don't know why but I was embarrassed. "Ask where the old boy keeps his harem," Larch growled. I was glad to squat on my haunches and get my bearings.

He spoke of matters in their order of importance. He touched on the crops, the late rains, the game. Food would be scarce this year. His glance wavered toward our pack loads and the sacks of rice. "Then you can spare one mouth," I said. "I need a woman."

He rubbed his hands and asked if I had ever seen a Gong-do woman. I said their beauty was famous throughout the hill country. With that we settled down to bargain.

It dragged on and on. He spun out the negotiations, upped his price, and haggled in the established procedure of selling a wife. "You are afraid to let me see your merchandise," I taunted finally.

He toyed with his whiskers. The next move was up to him. The three of us watched, tense, while he made the decision. He gave a signal, and a tall figure glided from the hut. Then I was certain why we'd come.

She might have been from another planet. Her head and neck together, encased in some bright glittering stuff, were nearly as long as the rest of her body. In the rays of the sinking sun the effect was one of incredible, dazzling splendor.

The neck tapered from her shoulders in a gilt cylinder, stretched to several times its normal length. The head was stranger still. I guess it had been bound with fiber when she was a baby and the bones were soft; now it was grown into a weird test-tube-shaped monstrosity more than two feet in length. From the eyebrows to the crown it was encased in shiny metal coils.

Jean broke the spell. "It's your golden girl, Eddy," she said. "Only she's brass."

"Whatever she is, she's a sensation! Somebody pinch me!" His mouth hung open. "Why—why we're rich, baby!"

SHE spoke just once, and it was as though somebody had struck a high note on a xylophone. The syllables floated from her elongated throat in an unearthly tone. "She speaks only the tongue of our people," the headman explained, and put her hand in mine.

It was as simple as that.

He invited us to remain in his house for a wedding

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feast. I thanked him and refused. That was one night I wanted to spend in the bush. We untied our horses and slowly walked up the slope, accompanied by the old man and an escort. Then they were gone, back to their village.

The cookfires were twinkling below, and I could hear children shouting. Without a word we headed around toward Loimu. The woman let out a whimper and dug in her bare heels. Larch gave her a push and grabbed one wrist. She was jabbering in that dialect again.

For the first time I had a close look at her face. She might have been pretty, except for the hardware, which pinched out her cheeks too round. A tear gathered in the corner of one eye and overflowed. I saw it trickle down the bridge of her nose, tracing a path on her skin. It rolled down her chin into the brass collar and disappeared.

She peered over her shoulder as we led her up the ridge. When we got about a mile away she made a break. She couldn't run fast with all the weight, and Larch caught her. It took both of us to hold her she was kicking and struggling so hard. For her size she was strong. "We'd better truss her up," Larch said.

"Eddy." Jean's voice was crisp, without any emotion. "We're not taking her with us."

"Whatsa matter? Going soft all of a sudden?" He took a step forward and stopped. My .45 was glinting in her hand. "What is this—a gag?"

"It's an order," she said. "Let go of that girl. You too, Brad."

"Damn you!" His grip loosened, and the woman tore free. Uncertain, she poised a second, then wheeled and ran. The last I saw was a dazzling speck of gold streaking down the hill. I knew I should be reacting some way, at least endeavoring to feel, but I didn't. The only thing I felt was numb.

Jean thrust the revolver forward. "Let's get going. It's a long way to Rangoon." I lined up behind Larch, keeping an eye on the bulge at his left armpit. "Walk ahead slow." It would be pitch dark in a few minutes, and we'd be alone, a hundred miles from nowhere.

"You can give me my gun now, Jean," I said. "It's empty."

Larch pivoted on his toes. "Why you—!" his right hand flashed up as I lunged. The automatic swung in a vicious arc. I ducked it whistling past my ear and stumbled. Larch cut again, smashing the butt down on my shoulder.

The gun sailed out of his fingers as he fell over me. He wrenched away and dove for it. I landed on top of him swinging. I hit him once, and then again, flush on the chin. He groaned and lay still.

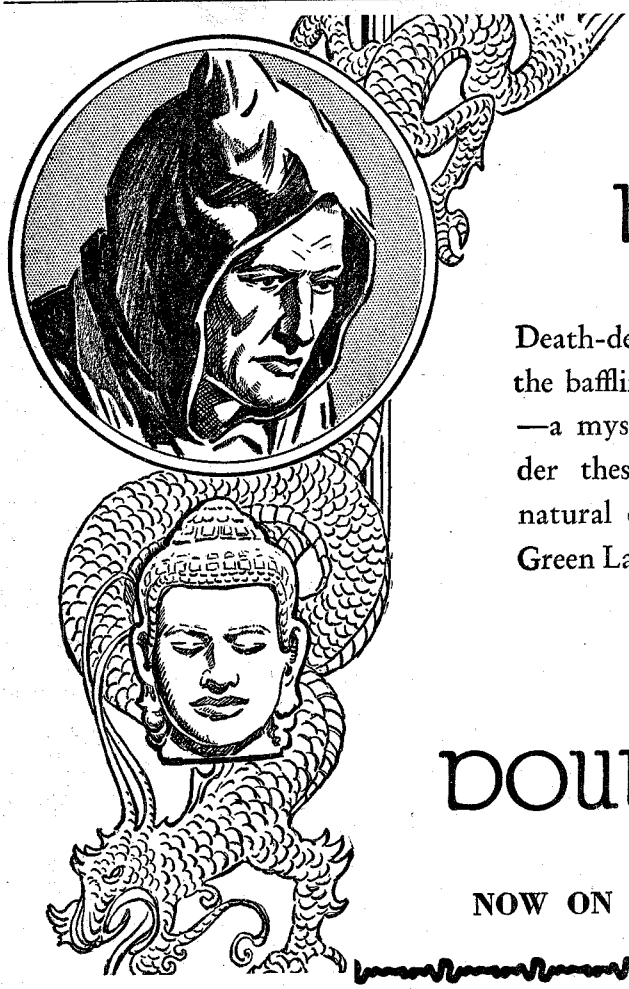
We sat there a long time, waiting for him to regain consciousness, and listening to the rising chorus of night noises. All kinds of ideas were racing through my mind. At last Jean said: "Remember something you told me once? That it was a funny country where anything can happen?"

The set lines in her face relaxed into a smile. She seemed young and rather wistful, I thought, as she looked out over the bush. "You're a pretty good guide, aren't you, Brad?"

"A good guide," I said, "knows when not to talk."

The only time I broke the rule was when I told this story—at the Trophy Club in Rangoon. They laughed and accused me of yarning. Nobody believes I swapped a hundred pounds of rice for a gold-headed woman, and let her slide through my fingers, but I don't care.

Eddy Larch has unearthed a nine foot giant, and his museum is prospering back in the States, but no one would believe him either. The only eyewitness I have is my wife, and she doesn't like to talk about it.



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Cowboy, Ride Your Luck

By Jack Byrne

These men with the crude hand-made sled had been racing Death to reach Gamble's store

STUMBLING DRUNKENLY into a bank robbery, JIM CARDINAL frightens away the robbers and—much to his own surprise—becomes the hero of Oxbow Town. Yesterday he was just an ordinary run-of-the mine cowpoke for the Rafter spread; rejected by NELLIE JARRET because he showed no promise. Today he is commissioned to go and get the BURKHART gang, suspected of the bank robbery as well as other crimes in the surrounding country.

Supporting Jim are Oxbow's leading citizens—WILL SLOCUM, cashier of the Stockmen's Bank; SCOTT KELLISON, foreman of the Syndicate; and JASON MCWHORTER, the bank's president. These men all agree that they can no longer trust the local law.

For CLEM VICKERY, Oxbow's marshal, is not only a surly, ruthless killer; he is suspected of playing in with the Burkhart gang. And Vickery loses no time in warning Jim to keep his nose out of community affairs.

Ignoring this warning, Jim narrowly escapes being murdered his first night on the trail; and there is strong evidence that the would-be bushwhacker was GIL ROVARD, Vickery's deputy. Which reminds Jim of something he heard the night he stumbled into the bank: a whisper, "Kill—?" He wonders now whether that whisper could have been "Gil—?"

The second attempt on his life is made as he rides into the Kettledrum hills—his boyhood country—on the strong chance that Burkhart and his men are holing up there. As he crosses the Blackjack River on a raft, he is shot at from the bank, hit three times, and knocked into the merciless torrent of the Blackjack.

A MIRACLE saves Jim from almost certain death, when he is dragged out of the river and cared for by NEBRASKA GAMBLE, a strong perky little eighteen-year-old whose uncle, CALVIN GAMBLE, now runs the store her father started.

Jim's life is saved—that's something; but he seems to have failed utterly in his job. Gone with the Blackjack are his horse, his supplies, the gun given him by Scott Kellison. And worse—much worse—is the loss of the bankroll, salary and expenses, given him by the men of Oxbow. For that money didn't fall away in the river: it was stolen after his rescue!

He's pretty sure that moonshine-soaked Uncle Calvin took it; and he sees evidence that Gamble is using his place as a hideout for outlaws. But before he can do anything about that, a howling snowstorm sweeps down over the country; shots and cries come out of the night; and Nebraska guides Jim out to rescue the passengers of a coach that has broken down in the blizzard.

They are a strange lot: Gabe, the driver, trying to escape the blame for getting the party lost; a tall, wry-necked fellow with slick black hair and a black mustache; a fat man—Major Daw—whose face stirs a dim recollection in Jim; a stern young preacher . . . and the couple.

A blond-headed, strongly handsome man of no more than thirty; a tall, black-haired, radiantly beautiful woman. After the house has settled down for the night, while Jim is trying to sleep, she comes into the living room where the blond man is sitting. She tells him, "I am myself again, Martin."

Jim does not understand the scene; but as the woman goes back to her room, he senses that a new chill is in the room, a sadness. . . .

The first installment of this three-part serial, herein concluded, appeared in the Argosy for September 13

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CHAPTER XI

CAL RAN FIRST

JIM dozed, and awoke to a dwindle of embers. He had some vague impression of a sound or movement that had roused him, and he opened his eyes to an instant awareness of some surrounding difference, something queer.

The gloom, the chill, the hush. . . . Faint sounds were magnified. The breaths of the sleepers sighed, and a floor-board whined with the shift of Jim's weight. There was another noise from somewhere, faint and hard to identify. . . .

A voice yelled wildly. Gunblast whacked the walls. Jim rolled instinctively, balling his body, and Nebraska's gun was in his fist as he scrambled up.

Major Daw's shrillness topped the sudden-surging tumult. "Thieves!" he yelled. "Prowlers! Stay away; they're after me. I'll shoot!"

Confusion milled! Thump and thrash and furor. The panic died stubbornly, even when Jim had found a lamp and lighted it. Daw, forted behind his toppled chair, was covering the outer door with a brandished revolver. Gabe had crashed down with a table, trying to flee. The skinny dude was flat on the floor, gun unlimbered; and the big blond man had grabbed a fire-iron. Nebraska, robed and slippered, was the last to appear.

Daw swore up and down that deviltry had been afoot. With his satchel clamped to his chest, with fright sweating his brow, he glared unsparing accusation. He'd heard movements within, the creak of steps. There'd been outer noises as well, somebody fumbling the main door. He'd felt the breath of cold and fired at it.

His bullet had gouged the base of the wall ten feet beyond the door. "Nice shootin'," Jim said. "Suppose it had been one of us who got up for a drink of water?"

He opened the door to a wave of frigid air. He peered out at the snowy expanse, shrugged as he barred the portal again. "You sure you didn't dream it, mister?"

"I'm carrying valuables," the fat man mumbled. "I didn't hardly close my eyes. A man's got a right to protect—"

Uncle Calvin screeched. He had disappeared momentarily, and now he came yelping and galloping. He flourished a boot. "They *was* somebody!" he cried. "It's gone. I been robbed. Stole while I slept. I hid it safe—"

"Hid what?" said Nebraska. "Who stole what?"

Calvin bugged his eyes. He swallowed, and his chin sagged. "Why—uh—my watch is gone. It's—yeah, it's my best gold watch and chain was got!"

It was close to five o'clock by then, and the hubbub continued into the dawn. As soon as the fires were going and Nebraska had the breakfast started, Jim made a pretext to go outside. In the early grayness he scouted a wintery world. A clear day coming, he guessed, and perhaps the bitter cold would abate with the sun.

"Spring froze over and ice in the river edge," he reported to Nebraska. "I reckon I'll have to shovel a path to the barn."

"You set an' eat these flapjacks," she said. "I'm fixin' a little somethin' here to carry in for her. She tossed the whole night through, poor thing. Estrella, that's her name. Sounds pretty, don't it?"

"Look here," Jim said. "All that rumpus a while ago—"

She put a finger to her lips. "Wait till we find some quiet place to talk in." Her brows arched and her eyes were knowing. "You needn't to worry, Jim. Your trouble's over."

"I wouldn't quite say that," drawled Jim. "But it will keep a while, I reckon."

THE stock to feed and water, wood to fetch and the household chores—with so many busy things to do the time went galloping. Uncle Calvin retired to the store ell, the handsome woman kept to her room, and the rest roundsided the big main fire. Weather was the argument now.

"How much do you figger," Jim asked, "to charge apiece for board and lodgin' and waitin' on 'em hand and foot? Howcome we're the only two can turn our hands to anything?"

"They're unsettled," Nebraska said. "I don't really mind. It's—well, it's excitement to remember. This early snow don't hold. They'll be travelin' out tomorrow or the next day."

Jim lounged near Gabe to roll a cigarette.

"Don't a one of 'em know what they're talkin'," Gabe said. "Lookout ain't so many miles by the longest roundabout. You give me a good strong hoss . . ."

Jim shrugged. "Let's you and me step outside," he said, "and I'll show you why a horse won't do. Best to wait, that's my advice. With the ground soft and the sun out, these freak snows can melt as quick as they fall. I seen it happen."

He scooped a snowy handful. "Packin' down a mite a'ready," he said.

"What you scoutin' fer?" Gabe asked. "What make you so prowly?"

"This mornin's thief," said Jim. "Unless he flapped wings we should found some tracks about."

Gabe waved a hand. "Ferget it. The major, he's full of such spooks an' scares. I had 'im along on manys the trip, and if it wasn't riders trailin' us it was ambush set in the next comin' hollow. Chief reason fer it, far as I can see, is to let people know what a big important man he is an' what high-caliber business he travels on."

"Daw—" Jim frowned. "Who'd he be?"

"You never heard of the Mountain Land Company or the Cattle Shippers' Exchange? He's both of them and more to boot. He likes to seal his bargains with cash on the barrel head, an' I got no doubt there's plenty *dinero* packed in his little satchel."

"Man that jumpy shouldn't be allowed a gun," Jim said. "What's he carry money for if it makes him that skeery?"

"Woundn't trust nobody else, I guess," said Gabe. "Shot two Wells-Fargo guards one time, they say, takin' them for holdup men. Yep, he's mighty gingery."

"This Shelby," Jim drawled. "I know I heard of him before but I just can't place it."

"That's like mislayin' Montana Territory," said Gabe. "The Totem mines, the Heelfly ranch—"

"Hell!" Jim exclaimed. "Is he *that* Shelby?"

"I knew Mart's daddy before him," said Gabe, "and a better man than old Big Red never drawn a breath."

Jim nodded. Big Red Shelby—even backwoods kids had heard his name and fame. They said he had the golden touch, that money grew on trees for him. When he died, killed off in his prime, he left behind a kingdom with a bull-tight fence around it. That blond bear sulking in the house had inherited the wealth and the powers of it.

"Martin Shelby," said Jim. "Sure, now I recall. I seen in a paper how all the bigwigs rode to his weddin' on special trains. He married some high-toned girl from the East—"

He eyed Gabe sharply. "Is that it? Ain't that his wife?"

"It's none of our business," the stage driver muttered. "They're old enough; they should know what they're doin'."

"Who is she?"

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"That's the part I didn't like," said Gabe, "but what's a man in my place to do? She's Cole Madden's wife, an' Cole Madden's supposed to be Mart Shelby's best *amigo*. Mart's own wife is a tiny thing, sized like a doll and just as pretty. It's less'n a year since she had her baby."

Jim moistened his lips. Last night's brief scene lived in his mind again, toned in heartbreak and shadowed in futility.

"Hey, you two!" Nebraska called. "Don't go pokin' off, you hear? I'm fixin' dinner shortly."

SHE came with a pair of water buckets. Jim said he'd get the hand-ax and they'd have another whack at the hillside spring. He continued to stand idly, however, watching Gabe mosey back toward the house.

"What's into you, Jim?" Nebraska asked softly.

"I dunno. I was kind of thinkin'. I was wonderin' about people, about me, and the run of things."

She glanced over her shoulder. "You walk ahead," she said. "I'll stumble as we go, and fall against you, and you needn't be surprised what I shove in your pocket."

"What?" said Jim, though he already knew.

"Git along," Nebraska ordered. "It's yellowback money, if you got to know."

Her voice murmured close behind him as he trudged the snow. "I could tell from how you acted," she said, "that you was missin' somethin' not easy lost. Uncle Calvin soon made it plain where your loss had gone."

"I'd taken care of it," Jim said. "I was gettin' fixed around—"

"I known 'im long for a scoundrel," she said, "but I didn't think he'd sunk so low as to rob a helpless man beneath our roof. He was too wabbly drunk to lend me a hand with you, but he later found the stren'th and slyness to creep out to the fireplace and search through your belongings."

"He's bound to suspicion you soon or later," said Jim. "It might been better—"

"You think I'm scared of *him?*" she scoffed. "I know the hidey places where he squirrels his private things. More times than one I jiggled that latch on his door while he lay snorin'. What I still can't account for, though, is that fat man shootin'. I was never near that yon side of the room. I'd been and gone ten minnits past."

Jim angled behind a snow-weighted clump. He turned, and Nebraska's hand was thrusting.

"Here; take it."

But his fingers were more intent upon gripping her wrist than upon the crumple of currency. "Listen quick," he said. "It wasn't you Daw heard. There was somebody else, somebody skulkin' outside. I seen the tracks when I went out, and I later covered 'em with my own. It seemed best to hush more excitement."

"But who, Jim?" she breathed. "Who'd be abroad such a night?"

"The trail petered out at the river," Jim said. "I don't know who made it, but I do know who I hope did."

He lifted his hand from pocket to show the butt of the pistol she had loaned. "I got my eyes wide open," he said. "I aim to be ready for what's next to come. Best thing to do, as I can see, is dip our water and go on back and wait for it."

Nebraska nodded. Her eyes were grave, looking up at him. "I wisht I was a man," she said. "I'd like to never mind the waitin'."

"Who wouldn't?" said Jim. He moved his glance warily, for there was a queerish something in her look that he couldn't quite judge. It was a deep and shining something that gave him a solemn quirk. It put a puzzle in his mind, but it likewise soothed and gave him a confidence too.

HE SHOWED his tricks at the dinner table; spoons and forks that changed places and a salt dish that disappeared. He told one story that melted even the preacher's frostiness. With the sun holding out, and the trees dripping slush, and tomorrow's travel promising wet but fair, the whole house began to join in his cheer.

Major Daw was heard to declare that the storm's mischance was no blame of Gabe's. Martin Shelby, a little later, quit his gazing place at the window to march across and tap the bedroom door. His face was set in determination and he didn't seem to care that the big room watched and heard.

"Who's there?"

"I want to talk to you, 'Strella. We may as well face it now. We've got to settle it."

The handsome woman stood tall in the opening of the door. She moved forward to see them all and be seen.

"Settle it how?" she asked. "On what basis, Martin?"

It was open challenge, and he accepted it. "How else can we settle it," he said, "except as a pair of fools? Fools who lost their heads; fools saved from bigger foolishness by accident. What other basis can there be but bite the truth and eat the consequence?"

She nodded slowly. She stood aside to widen the entrance for him. The door was closing upon the shamefaced silence of the larger room when the echoing halloo sounded from outside:

"Cal—Cal Gamble!"

The shouted words were not so loud, but none could mistake the harsh note of urgency and desperation that they carried.

Jim Cardinal was first upon the porch. His fingers cuddled his pocket gun, but his grip relaxed at sight of the figure that came weaving from the southward edge of timber. Uncle Calvin bolted from the store, windmilling his arms and yelling them back, and the oncomer halted.

He stood like a snow-fuzzed bear and pawed his face. He made another staggery step, then toppled forward.

To Jim's surprise it was Uncle Calvin who raced him through clogging drifts to the rescue.

CHAPTER XII

KILLER-SHADOW

EXHAUSTION had dragged the wayfarer down. Jim lifted him, a lightweight burden, and saw a mummy's weazened face. Watery eyes, puffed and inflamed, peered blankly at him. Black-rimmed lips breathed a whispery mutter:

"Back yonder—the woods. . . . The boss—bad hurt. Gotta git a doctor."

Uncle Calvin floundered up. "Keerful," he panted. "Place full of strangers."

Jim let himself be shouldered off as the storeman fell to his knees beside the spent traveler. "Trapper from over Deerkill," Calvin cried. "Him an' his partners trade with me."

He bent down close.

"Tend to 'im then," Jim said. He hooked his arm in signal to the others who were nearing, and followed the stranger's wavery backtrack. Gabe and Martin Shelby heeled after him.

Fifty yards within the timber they found the crude sledge. A bundled figure was stretched upon it, and a second man sat in the snow nearby, propped against a tree. He lifted his head at their approach, then drooped it limply again. He tried to gesture Jim away, to indicate the sledge, husking muffled words that Jim could barely understand:

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"Sawbones—pull 'im through. Damn storm played us out."

"Take the sled," Martin Shelby said. "I'll handle this man."

The sled was a box on runners, emergency made, with a haul-rope harness forward and a push bar behind. The bundled man moaned and stirred when Jim touched a finger to his cheek. The pitiful sound, the fever of the cadaverous face, and Jim knew it was Death these men had been racing. Death to beat when the blizzard caught 'em.

"What ails 'im?" he asked. "What's he sick of?"

His companion gave a grunt of pain. "Easy, mister," he said to Shelby. "My arm—" He sagged against the tall man, and they saw that his right arm was slung against his chest beneath his blanket-coat. "Lemme alone. Take care the boss, damn yuh. Bullet in his hip an' we gotta git—"

Shelby caught him, lifted him like a log. Gabe shouldered the rope and broke the trail, Jim manned the push-bar, and long-striding Shelby tailed the drag, carrying the weight in his arms with the same ease that a lesser man might have toted a baby.

Nebraska had the house ready. She was waiting them on the porch, and Jim remarked the flustered look she gave him. She remained her brisk and level-headed self, though, in the details of attending the newcomers' needs, and in a short while the big main room had some sense and order.

The little weazened fellow was quickest to recover. Upon his warning they had not lifted the wounded man. The sled was carried inside and placed before the fire. Hot whiskey revived the man with the injured arm, but the fog was slow to lift from his brain. He slumped in his chair, eyes staring roofwards, and blurted a string of soft oaths in a voice oddly blurred.

His little companion limped across and slapped him hard. He clamped the mumbling mouth with his hand. "He's off his head," he apologized. "He don't know there's ladies."

The man in the chair recovered presently. He reached to pull the gagging fingers away. He licked his cracked lips, peered nearsightedly.

"What's up, Kid?"

"Sit tight," said the other. "He's still alive. We still got half a fightin' chance."

Uncle Calvin stepped to the front to tell their story. Their place was over southwards in the Deerkill roughs. Gun accident, trigger caught a snag, and Buck shot a bullet into his own hip. Storm trapped 'em skirting the Pinnacles, lost miles from nowhere, and when their hosses give out—well, the one word for it was miracle.

The weazened man had a crooked grin that made his blotched face ten years younger. "Miracle an' then some," he said. He moved his hand vaguely, and Jim Cardinal felt a cold shiver in his back at thought of the terrible trek that the gesture glossed over. Or perhaps it was a shiver of fear for a more immediate danger.

For by now Jim was certain of the identity of these three. Uncle Calvin had called other names for them, but men like these were never made to hide behind common names. The grinning speaker was the Step-and-a-Half Kid. An unguarded word had addressed him so, and his skippy limp was added proof of it. The man in the chair was Cotton O'Dell, called Cottonmouth because of the defect in speech that sometimes garbled the drawl of his native Georgia bayous.

And there in the crude sled, dozing between life and death, was the man they called boss—kingpin of all the Kettledrum thieves, the he-wolf Jim Cardinal had set out to trap, unmistakably Earl Burkhart.

Jim met Nebraska Gamble's glance from across the room, and her look was confirmation.

STEP-AND-A-HALF let his grin travel. Twelve of them in the room, and the shadow of Death the ill-starred thirteenth.

"I hear we ain't the on'y ones," he said, "who run against bad luck. We're much obliged for what you folks has done, but we still ain't got no help for—uh—Buck. What you say, Cal? What you call fer our best bet?"

"Lookout's what we had in mind. Doc Isherwood."

"But he—" Calvin swabbed his lips with the back of his hand. "It's comin' dark. It might turn cold ag'in, or blow. I don't see how—"

"Buck's mighty bad," said Step-and-a-Half softly. "His hip soured up on 'im, Cal—poisoned like—an' when he ain't passed out the pain's pure hell. He's burned up with fever, gettin' weaker all the while. If he ain't tended mighty soon—"

"But Isherwood's too old," cried Calvin. "Who could carry word to 'im, this kind of underfoot? How could the doc be got out here, suppose he wanted to, until the roads thaw down? There's neither you boys got stren'th enough to push another mile."

"Hell yuh shout," growled Cotten O'Dell. He straightened in his chair, and his frost-blotched face, soot-streaked and stubbledjawed, was an apish mask of humanity. His hairy fist trembled with weakness. "We got 'im so far. We hain't a-quittin' on the boss so long as I kin crawl. Befo' I'll see 'im left to die—"

The injured man moved in the sled. He turned his head and moaned. "Kid," he whispered, and the word trailed off into a sigh.

Step-and-a-Half knelt beside him. Some ugly suction ringed the others close. Earl Burkhart was a wake-eyed corpse in a coffin, clinging to life by the clamp of bearded jaws.

"Gamble's store, boss," the Kid said softly. "The weather's slacked and there ain't far left to go. How you feelin'? How you holdin' out?"

"I'm still alive," said Burkhart. "It's the pain—the grind. If we could fish the bullet out—" He proved the strength left in him by the sanity of his eyes that surveyed the circle of faces. He lifted a hand to grip the box-edge of the sled. "You sure there's still a chance—that we can make it, Kid?"

"Tell 'im the truth," shrilled Calvin. "You know he ain't no shape to move. Let's use what brains we got. We're hogtied ever' way from the jack, and he'd be the last to risk good lives—"

Big Martin Shelby shoved him. A sweep of his arm staggered the storeman back, slammed him against the wall.

"Don't lie to me, Kid," Earl Burkhart pleaded. His voice came stronger, and he tried to struggle up against the Kid's palm. "It's my hard luck. You promised me—damn you, gimme back my gun!"

Within himself Jim Cardinal could feel some of the quick emotions that pinched the face of the Step-and-a-Half Kid. It was plain to see that Burkhart's chances were numbered in hours now, and honesty was forced to admit that Uncle Calvin had blurted the truth.

To stay put was death by slow torture. To risk the morass trail was little better hope. There was Lookout's law to consider, and maybe Earl Burkhart had spoken the wise-wolf judgment upon himself. It might be best to give him his gun and let him end his pain.

"Lay back," said the quaver-voiced Kid. "I know what I promised and I ain't forgot. But there's bound to be some other chance. Ain't they some you folks, for the love of God—"

"Gimme the gun!" Burkhart said.

"No!" cried Nebraska Gamble. "We can't—"

She was looking at Jim Cardinal, darkly staring, but

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Jim needed no reminder of what he had to do. There was trembly emptiness inside him, sweat hot on his face, but his faltering voice said what he had to say,

"I reckon, if nobody else—I mean, I don't know if I can, but I'll make a stab to cut that bullet out."

WHAT else was there for common sense to do? What was there to lose? A lamed hound, a gored steer, a wolf in a trap—it was human nature to do what you could to tend their miseries. A man was just a different kind of critter.

Step-and-a-Half had hold of his arm. "Can you do it, boy? That's what we tried ourselves—"

"I dunno," Jim said. "I'm willin', though, if he is. If the poison ain't too deep in his blood, if he ain't too weak a'ready."

"Who's weak?" Earl Burkhart grated. "Lemme look at that gent there."

He had pushed up, half sitting, and his voice was almost frenzied: "Hell, I ain't nowheres give out! It's the pain that wears me down. I been shot before, boy, and I know I'd be all right with the lead dug out. There's no job to it for a man with a steady hand."

He stared at Jim. "You butchered, ain't you?"

"Some," said Jim. "I'm good enough with a skinnin' knife."

Burkhart grunted. His mouth wrenched and his eyes pinched closed. "Then you're good enough for me, son," he said after a moment. "Fix me on that table yonder and I'll show you where the hurt is. I'll tell you what to do."

He sank back abruptly, grimacing, but his eyes stayed keen and bright. "I'm ready doc," he muttered, "whenever your cutter's ready."

Cotton O'Dell turned Jim around. He peered at him, mumbling, and though Jim could make no sense from the words he understood the grateful emotions that contorted the ugly features.

"What'll you need, Jim?" Nebraska asked.

Boiling water and cloths and basins—that was what he'd need. Light some lamps and center that biggest table. You there, Calvin—somebody—get a couple sticks. Middling sticks, any kind, to maybe rig the gadgets that might shut off the bloodflow. A good sharp knife, his own new blade, and see what the store had in wire.

Then heat a poker in the fire, for you can never tell with poisoned blood. Boil the knife and them other things, and set the whiskey handy to clean the wound with. Better thread a needle too.

"You all set, mister?" asked Step-and-a-Half.

"I reckon so," said Jim, and he rolled his borrowed sleeves like he'd once seen a doctor. His river-clawed hands were two dead fish, and all his fingers thumbs, but somebody had to do it.

"IT'S MORE thigh than hip," said Step-and-a-Half. "The bullet ranged upwards. It ain't no fresh wound neither, as you'll see. That was just our story. It happened five days ago, and three them days we was holed off from help by a Montana posse."

Five days; Montana posse. . . .

"With Cotton's arm hurt like it is, and me whose belly turns at the smell of blood, we wasn't much use. He thought that he could tough 'er through, but the pain got too much. How slow we had to travel was the thing that got us storm-caught."

Jim nodded. He felt all right, real calm and steady, except for the doggone numbishness that couldn't collect his thoughts quite straight. His sight was clear, but somehow when he looked around he saw the faces slanted crooked.

Gabe and Uncle Calvin and the tall, handsome woman. Skinny Blackie, the gamboleer, flipping a coin and catching it. Major Daw with his baby valise, and the Greeny cat beside him.

Jim blinked. For a little second, seeing the glint of fireplace flame against the fat man's spectacles, Jim could think he was back in the Stockmen's Bank with fire-eyes set to pounce at him.

"I'll lift him up," Martin Shelby said. "Clear the way there."

Table ready. Easy, easy—tote him easy! Watch out his tender leg. Sure, let him have a drink of whiskey. . . .

Earl Burkhart breathed deep. "That's all I needed," he said. "Hop to it, mister."

Slit the cloth, bare the flesh, loose the ugly bandage. Somehow the grim sight planted Jim Cardinal's feet on the ground.

"Wet me a cloth," he said. His fingers pressed thus, his knife held so, and the blade-tip slicing. . . .

Wooden guns he'd whittled for the kids. An oaken heart and arrow carved with Nellie Jarrett's initials. There'd been bucks he'd bled and quartered, horses he'd fired, foundered cows he'd cut in calfing. He'd skilled his knife on a thousand wild pelts, and meat was meat, blood was blood. Critter or human, live or dead, there wasn't so much difference.

The preacher and the lean-legged dandy-man, either side, held aloft the hand-lamps. Earl Burkhart stretched upon his hip, elbow propped, fingers cross-gripped upon the table edge. Step-and-a-Half and Cotton O'Dell supported his upper body, and his legs were clamped against thrashes of pain by the tall blond man and the chaw-jawed stagecoach driver.

The sad and handsome lady, with her beautiful green dress already stained and soiled, had charge of the smaller table where Jim Cardinal's coming needs were laid. Nebraska stood back against the wall, ready to run any unforseen errands. She was spent and weary from two long days that had crammed themselves with a lifetime's doings.

The lift of Earl Burkhart's head, the cord-ridged strain of his neck, was sign of Jim's knife probing. The bulge of the blond man's shoulders, the clamp of his jaw, told the spasms of pain he was wrestling. The droning sound, soft and monotonous, was Step-and-a-Half's involuntary whimper.

"There—yes, yes!" Earl Burkhart gasped.

"It's deeper in," said Jim Cardinal.

The hunched fat man rocked in his chair, faster and faster. Sweat streaked the preacher's face, and Gabe's mouth twisted with his efforts. Earl Burkhart loosed his table-hold to snatch the hand of Step-and-a-Half. The weazened little longrider, his eyes squeezed tight shut, gripped fingers and wrist against his chest to share the shake-arm agony.

"He's fadin'," cried the dandy-man. "He's passin' out!"

"Gimme a sop," said Jim.

"Hold it," panted the big blond man. "Let me take a higher grip."

It was Step-and-a-Half who groaned aloud when Earl Burkhart crumpled. The wounded man's head sagged, his body went limp, and the preacher started to cross himself. But Cotton O'Dell, who eased him back, grated a curse at them.

"Go on!" he ordered. "He's past hurt now. Go on an' finish it!"

WHEN it was done, when Jim Cardinal straightened and turned around and wiped his arm across his forehead, Nebraska knew what had held her. Jim nodded vaguely toward the door, and his shoulder leaned against

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the jamb when she had opened it. He rested his weight against her, crossing the porch, and she sat him on the lowest step and turned her back to him. Men like to be alone in such sicknesses.

Presently he called to her. He stood to show that he'd recovered, laughing a little as she rubbed the snowy handful over his face. But he sobered fast.

"I shouldn't tried," he said. "It was no use. He's dead, or just as good as."

"Not while he's still breathin'," she said.

They stood in a window's patch of light, in the night's cool healing. "It got me all of a sudden," said Jim, "right there at the end. My whole insides turned over."

"The air'll do you good," she said. "We'll walk around back to the kitchen."

Side by side they went in silence. Scattered stars specked the upper cloud drifts, and the dark was fresh and clean. Their steps cruched a soft white carpet, and it was destiny that led them straight toward the kill-shadow waiting in the shadows.

They turned the corner of the house, and from the deeper gloom along the wall the shadow jumped.

To Jim Cardinal, trudging the inside track with head bowed down, the attack was a thunderbolt from nowhere. To Nebraska it was little more, for all she saw was a whisk of movement, a shifting blur. It was wild instinct that lurched her against Jim, that thrust him hard into the shapeless threat, into the gunblast.

CHAPTER XIII

DON'T SAY GOODBYE

JIM was staggered; he was falling, and it seemed to him that the hidden gun exploded full in his face. Force of concussion, powder flash—and his ears were ringing, his eyes were dazzled, bitterness fumed his throat.

Nebraska's thrust had toppled him a scant handsbreadth beneath the bullet's harm: fool's luck again. No other move could have escaped such a short-range gun assault, and only a grappling defense could foil the deadlier danger of a second shot.

Jim's diving impetus launched him in. He pawed a coat, his shoulder rammed a body. He barely felt the gun-barrel that slashed his ear and hammered his neck, for now he was part of a grunting tangle of arms and legs and heaving bodies.

He had the killer grappled in a hug that thumped them both against the building wall; and the quick yell that Jim Cardinal shrilled was no appeal for aid. It was wildcat rage he shouted.

Night's blindness could not hide from him that this was it, the showdown. His reaching fingers, his snarling throat, every ounce of his racing blood knew that Gil Rovard was the ambusher he was climbing.

And Jim climbed him fast and furious. The realized truth of affairs in Oxbow Town, the knowledge of what a dumb fool he had been, kindled a fury that stretched Jim's size and powered him with magic muscles. He clawed for Rovard's gun and clamped a wrist. In a snowy spew they thrashed and rolled, and Jim fought with fist and foot and knee and elbow.

Blood warmed Jim's face and a vise was squeezing his windpipe. He stiff-armed a chin, jerked a lifting knee-thrust, and the vise relaxed.

As Rovard backed, Jim threw an overhand punch that beefed into the face. The mash of knuckles into soggy flesh was satisfaction that tingled clear to his shoulder.

He crowded the killer against the log wall and pinned him there. He snatched the pistol from a feebled grasp and tossed it wide. Rovard still mauled clumsy blows, panting like a spitcat, but Jim had him chest to chest. He gripped twin handfuls of throaty meat and tried to do three things at once. The items that he had in mind were bash those killer brains against the wall and break his neck and throttle him.

BUT NEBRASKA hauled him off as the voices and the lamps came running. She yanked him by the hair of his head, and when he stepped away Gil Rovard slumped flat forward.

"Don't, Jim don't!" Nebraska cried. "You'll kill 'im!"

"That's right," Jim puffed. "I'll need 'im alive for evidence. Somebody help me drag 'im here."

The mixed household of Gamble's store crowded up with a hundred questions. They sat Jim's antagonist against the wall, and the mauled face in the lampglow was barely to be recognized as Clem Vickery's ex-deputy. Rovard rolled his eyes in a bleary upward glance.

"He was sent out to kill me," Jim explained. "He dogged ahead of me from Oxbow. Three times he set me waylay deadfalls, and how they missed ain't to my credit. Ain't that the fact, Rovard? Deny it, damn you!"

Gil Rovard spat between his spraddled legs into the snow. "You tell it."

"The closest time," Jim said, "was at Zeno's place where he knocked me in the Blackjack. I reckon he thought he'd finished me, but he had to make certain sure. Was that what poked you down the river next day, Rovard, huntin' the riffles and eddies for blood-money proof? Or was it what I carried you was after?"

Gil Rovard slewed a hand across his mouth. The beating he'd taken might have curdled his sense, but it did not dull the animal viciousness that glared up at Jim.

"Luck!" he said, and his wry lips cursed. "Squatter's dog—the blizzard. They called you soft mat, Cardinal; but I never figgered so damn' soft. T'ree hundred dollars in your pants—worth ten times over such a bonehead."

He straightened. He tried to rise, lurching, and Gabe caught at his arm. He staggered sidewise, rubber-legged, a drunken doll in the shifty lampglow, and two wavering strides spilled him down again. Jim was striding toward his huddled shape, bending, and he thought that Uncle Calvin was the first to cry the warning.

But Nebraska's voice was sharpest: "Jim! Look out—the gun!"

Gil Rovard was flopping over, darting out his hand, and it was his own revolver that the possum-playing killer had. His cunning tumble had pounced him on the weapon Jim had flung. He scooped it from the trample and tilted the muzzle as his body rolled. Jim Cardinal was his target.

The wham of his shot was fused with another deeper roar. Jim Cardinal, caught between the blasts, stood helpless-handed. In the startle of frightened lamps, the jumpy crisscross shadows, it was hard for a man to tell where he stood or what he saw, but it seemed to Jim that Gil Rovard's head was jerked as he fired, jolted as if by a blow. His legs kicked out, his arm dropped limp, and a darkening patch marked the kiss of his face on the snow.

Jim turned. Two paces beyond him stood Step-and-a-Half, and the little outlaw's pistol was lowering.

"First man I ever shot in the head," he said. "I beat 'im by about a half a second."

LATER on, in the hush of the after-midnight watch, Jim found the chance for a private word with the man who had killed to save him.

The air was thick in the big main room. Jim felt the need of a good cool drink, and he moved his feet to arise.

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A softness brushed his ankle, and the green-eyed tomcat came from beneath his chair. He looked at Jim, gave his tail a switch, and then confound if he didn't stroll off to lead the way to the kitchen. Jim wasn't sure he trusted that tomcat.

Cotton O'Dell sitting near the bedroom door, raised his head as Jim came along. The door opened for Step-and-a-Half, and through the gap Jim glimpsed the handsome woman, the runaway wife, sitting near a table lamp.

"How is he?" Jim asked softly.

Step-and-a-Half shrugged. "No difference I can see. Just lays there like a log, scarcely breathin'. She thinks, though, his fever's maybe better."

He carried a water pitcher. His swinging limp moved along the kitchen corridor, and Jim trailed after. The strike of a match showed the tomcat sniffing an empty saucer, and when Jim had lighted the bracket lamp he poured some milk for them both. Step-and-a-Half used the dipper in the bucket.

"I never said anything," Jim began, "about what you done out there."

Step-and-a-Half shook his head. "Did you hear me make any mention of what you done inside? I reckon you'd know how I felt about it. Win or lose—however the boss comes out—I'll still feel the same way."

"The one thing was," Jim said slowly, "I did have the notion Gil Rovard's name might mean somethin' to you."

"No me. Unh-uh, not any."

"Nor Clem Vickery's neither?"

The game-legged man eyed him intently. "I may have heard the name," he said, "but nothin' in particular."

Jim nodded. "That was how I figgered it. The other thing was that I aim to get back to Oxbow as quick as I can. Rovard's horse is somewheres close across the river, in case that Calvin can't find me one. My rush is personal business."

Step-and-a-Half unlatched the door. He sniffed the dark, sighted up toward waning stars, a placid sky. "I don't expect that none of us need be held much longer."

"But what I meant," said Jim, "was that I may heard more than these other folks did about the way of things in here. There was this and such that gave me notions. I wanted to say, though, that you needn't—that I wouldn't—"

"Yeah," said Step-and-a-Half, "that's what I told to Calvin. Your jaw ain't shaped like the talkin' kind. And anyhow—"

His hands moved vaguely. "I dunno. It all depends on him, the boss. If he don't pull through, then what the hell. Nothin' make no diff'rence then. But if he should—"

He tongued the corner of his mouth. "We won't be long for here," he said presently. "Not here or hereabouts. They say land's cheap in Mexico. A man with a little stake of cash. . ."

He jerked around. Jim had heard nothing, but now he saw that Nebraska was standing in the corridor dimness at the doorway. She came inside, and Step-and-a-Half took his water pitcher back to the bedroom where life and death were teetering.

NEBRASKA was dressed in her wrinkled, shapeless gray. Her hair was straggly, and for the first time Jim took note that it had a bronzy shine. More sorrel than chestnut when you looked real close.

"I knew you'd be itchin' to go," she said, sad-mouthed. "I heard what you just mentioned."

"Well," said Jim, "there's one more thing I got to do. Two things, mebbe."

"I don't blame you none," she said. "There's nothin' here. If I was a man—"

"This is diff'rent," he said. "It's a job to finish. It—well, it means a lot to me. I can't do nothin' else until it's settled, one way or another."

She looked down at her skirt. "You might, if you've a mind to, leave me know how it comes out. You could send a letter to the Lookout post. I suspect you won't be passin' back this way no more."

Jim flexed his gunhand fingers, and they were thick with doubts. "The chances are—It's hard to tell; it all depends—"

She raised her eyes an instant, eyes that held too much to read. "I guess I know, Jim. Anyhow, I'll always—I'll always wish you well. I got but one favor to ask."

"Why sure, sure; anything."

"When you do go, Jim, is all I ask, don't say goodbye to me. I'll just pretend—"

"Hey!" Jim cried. "Hold on now—listen!"

But she was turning, hurrying off, and in the circumstances he could see no better way to leave. With his main job still to finish, his biggest danger yet to face—well, how could a man so mixed in mind and spirit know what to say or do?

He rubbed his hands together. He stared at the blank doorway, the empty corridor, and the road back to Oxbow was all he could see. The break of her voice, though, was a sad, soft sound that wouldn't be left behind when he rode away. . . .

CHAPTER XIV

COWBOY'S LUCK

THE weather broke next afternoon in a drizzle of rain. The shrinking drifts turned soggy gray, and Jim Cardinal was first to venture them. He traveled out by misty morning, leading a dead man's horse; and if he had farewells for Gamble's store he told them to the sweating rocks he passed, to the weeping forest branches.

He had a destiny to keep. Right or wrong, he was bound for Oxbow Town.

In the fag of Sunday's daylight—a week and a day since he passed the other way, headed for gold and glory—his mud-flanked horse crossed the bridge at Tomahawk Run. Jim eased his toes from the stirrups, stretching his weary joints, and the wonder within him was that the time had been so short. Jogging into this last lap of his journey, it seemed he'd been gone for many a year and day.

He rode slowly on, and the pattern of the coming showdown was something still unknown. He'd schemed a dozen half-cooked plans to toss his noose of guilt, but the trouble was—as he admitted—that he hadn't the slickery brand of brains this deal would call for.

He had the truth cinched hard and fast. He knew loud evidence to shout. But the only actual proof he might supplied was back at Gamble's store, buried in a rock-piled grave along with Gil Rovard.

On the edge of town was a tumbly row of long-abandoned shacks and Jim reined among the clutter of them. He sat himself on a rickety step and rolled a cigarette. He smoked and smoked again, and the twilight came, and still all he knew was the same deep instinct that had smouldered his rage against Gil Rovard.

He flipped his cigarette and stood. Tonight there'd be no stumbling in and somehow fumbling out. He looked up at the darkening sky and crossed to the grazing horse.

"Well, what we waitin' for?" he said. "Come on, boy, let's mosey."

He led the animal in an angling course to the shadowed alley that back the far side of Wagon Street. A the rear of the Produce Supply he tied his reins, then went ahead

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in lone hunt past lumber stacks, a pile of kegs, the rubbish heaps.

Through building gaps he could spy upon the Sabbath calm of the town's main thoroughfare. In the stillness of coming night stray footfalls drummed the walks and a mutter of distant voices carried. The passersby were far between, however.

He went on at a swifter pace. He hurried the straight track that his instinct pointed, and damn the doubts. He came to the shadowed bulk of a larger building, and as he felt his way he touched the chill of window-bars.

These were the bars he thought he pawed that drunken night when he stumbled the opposite alley. Here was the jail-house, dark and forlorn. But along the upper side was a forward patch of light, a lamp behind a shade-drawn pane, and this marked the office lair of Oxbow's law, Clem Vickery.

Jim's jaw squared as he sidled forward.

SOMETHING less than an hour later, with his breath coming quick and sweat on his lip, he was rattling the lock of another door in another alley. A bustle of noise replied to his summons. Within the rear of the Stockmen's Bank papers fluttered and steel slammed steel and grating wood protested.

"Who's there?" old McWhorter boomed. "Who the devil—"

Jim called out his name. "I just got back, Mr. McWhorter," he said in a rush. "I been all over town; I got to get help from somebody!"

Will Slocum, a spectacled owl of astonishment, opened the alley door. Jason McWhorter, his tender foot supported on a stool, lowered his grabbed-up pistol and cursed in recognition.

"What you been drug through?" he said. "What's happened, boy? Need help for what?"

"To finish the job I was sent on," Jim said. "I got my rope on your robbers, or leastwise just about. Clem Vickery ain't to be found right now, but he's due in a little while."

The bearded banker slammed down a resounding fist. "You lost your head, Will? Bolt that door! Sit down there, Cardinal, and catch your breath and let's hear what this shootin's about."

"I couldn't find Scott Kellison neither," said Jim, "but some fellow's carryin' word where we'll be. He'll come straight here, I reckon. It's kind of lucky, in a way, that you picked tonight to get your bank books balanced. I was started for your house when somebody said—"

"Sit down, confound it!" McWhorter ordered. "Unkink your tongue and stop this blatherhead."

Jim sat. He flopped in a chair, and for the first time he saw the room in which the mystery began, where the drunken darkness had almost murdered him. There in one corner was the bulky safe that had held the thirty thousand reasons for Jim Cardinal's bedevilment.

THE MASSIVE hulk had little resemblace, in the light, to any kind of cat. But with the lamps doused, with a thief crouched in front of it and no more than a pistol-flash to illumine the vision of a drunkard stumbled in. . .

"All right, all right," the banker growled. "Come on with it!"

Jim nodded. "It's quite a story," he said, "and some of it's tricky to tell." He grinned vague apology to McWhorter's whiskery frown, to slack-chinned Will Slocum beyond. "The main point is that your robbery was none of Earl Burkhart's work. Neither him nor any of his crew. This whole deal here was home-planted."

"Hah!" cried McWhorter, "How many times have I said as much, Will? Can you prove it, Cardinal? Well?"

"I can try," said Jim. "The chief answer I got to every thing came right from this room. If I'd been a couple drinks soberer, that night I bungled in, I'd saved myself plenty of skin and misery. The best I could recall though, when I come to, was standin' just inside the door, and somebody whisperin' from across the room a word that sounded like 'Kill—?'

"Then a gun blammed from behind me, from the alley, and I thought that big safe yonder was a hump-backed, fire-eyed cat. But now I know—"

"Know what?" McWhorter demanded.

"Are you positive, Cardinal?" Will Slocum asked. "Do you mean you later recognized—"

"That's what the thieves was scared of," said Jim. "They was so scared to be recognized that they kicked over their robbery job to try and kill me then and there. Even later, when they found how drunk I was, they had to snoop my hotel room to make certain sure I didn't recall a thing. And afterwards—"

His head jerked. He stared toward the alley door.

"What is it?" Jason McWhorter growled.

Jim's hand had traveled to his waist, to the horn-handled gun, Nebraska's gift, tucked beneath his pants-band. "I thought I heard some noise outside," he said, after a listening moment.

McWhorter moved the pistol on his desk. "Damn the alley rats," he said. "Get on with it!"

Jim shrugged. If he sat a trifle straighter in his chair, if his muscles coiled and his hand didn't lift from gun-butt, it wasn't much to notice.

"Shooin' me into the Kettledrums," he said, "was playin' right into their hands. I begun to have my doubts when Clem Vickery stopped me just outside town and tried to pump me, tried to bribe me, acted crazy-queer. Mebbe he wasn't as queer as I thought, though: for that same night I discovered that his deputy was the man who'd been sent ahead along the trail to finish me."

"Vickery!" Jason McWhorter exclaimed. "By God, I wouldn't believe—"

"It was then it occurred to me," said Jim, "that *Gil*—for Gil Rovard—might been the word I heard."

A fist mauled the door. A voice muttered harsh urgency.

"Kellison," Will Slocum cried, and he sprang to admit the Syndicate range-boss.

SCOTT KELLISON thrust in, alert and commanding, squinting at the room, and perhaps the lamp-glare blurred his recognition of Jim.

"What's up?" he demanded. "Some damn' fool—I was in a poker game—he come and said—"

"It's Cardinal." Will Slocum pointed. "He's back with the goods on Vickery."

Scott Kellison's features mingled delight with astonishment. With a soft oath he strode forward, hand outstretched, and his hairy paw enveloped Jim's fingers in a squeeze of approbation.

"Cardinal, by God!" he cried. "I knew you had the stuff, boy! You mean to tell you already got proof—"

Jim loosed his hand. "Just about," he said. "The one thing I'm sorry for, Mr. Kellison, is I lost that gun you loaned me. I never got a single chance to shoot it, thought it did turn a bullet that might have finished me."

"Burkhart's bunch wasn't in on the robbery—ah—Scott," Will Slocum explained quickly. "It was Vickery and his deputy in here that night. Cardinal was just saying—"

Kellison smacked a fist into his palm. "You recall what I told you, Jason? I remarked at the time how almighty quick that pair of buzzards appeared in the alley. They

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hid close in the shadows, of course, and as soon as the shooting rushed people up they stepped out and shouted the name of the law."

"Will you both shut up?" the banker complained "Cardinal was about to make sense when you barged in. Let's hear what he's got to back his say-so. What about this deputy, this Rovard? He tried to kill you, didn't you say? What about that, and where is he—"

"I know where he can be found," said Jim.

"But what evidence can you swear against Vickery? What's hidin' up your sleeve?"

Jim's glance flicked to the alley door. Again Will Slocum had neglected to latch it, and that was the important thing. "As far as Vickery's concerned—" he began.

"By God," Scott Kellison grumbled, "it's already plain enough for me. Where's Tom Estep? Give me ten minutes to round up some of my boys and I'll handle—"

"I wouldn't if I was you," said Jim, and there was a note in his quiet tone that narrowed Kellison's stare. "I had quite a while to ponder about the marshal, you see, and a couple things hit me queer. When Vickery stopped me, the day I left town, he was just guessin' what I was up to. But whoever sent Rovard to kill me—well, Rovard left here before even I did, and he knew not only exactly where I was headed but also how much money I carried."

"What you mean?" said Kellison.

"I mean—" Jim drew a breath and his belly was tight—"that it ain't Clem Vickery who deserves a lynch-noose. I mean that I know, and can damn' soon prove, that the fire-eyed cat I saw on the robbery night was gunflash reflected on a man who wore glasses—spectacles like Will Slocum's there. And the whisper I heard wasn't *Kill* or *Gil;* it was *Kell,* for Scott Kellison's nickname."

FOR A heartbeat's duration dead silence held. This scene had been planned and staged for surprise, for shock that would goad these sly schemers into counter-action that would confess the guilt that otherwise stood so dubiously proved; and for a split-hair instant Jim feared his coup had failed.

But suddenly the tension broke; and to Jim's consternation Will Slocum led the grab.

Jim had tabbed Scott Kellison for the ring-nosed bull. It was Kellison who had wangled him on a fool's wild errand with murder at its end, who had blandished him with mocking words and flaunted him with a loan of a traitor gun; and to pit himself against the snaky draw of the Syndicate boss had been the settlement pride demanded.

All his intentness had been fixed upon Big Scotty's presence, and he timed his snatch for pistol-butt with Kellison's twitch of shoulders. Old McWhorter's gasp was a sound he barely heard, and Will Slocum's lank pounce for the weapon on the banker's desk was an offward blurt of movement that he sensed more than he sighted.

The quickest his scant-drawn gun could do was second best in a thunder of muzzle-boom and bullet-roar.

He triggered blind, no aim at all, into the lash of Slocum's fire. He shot in panic's jerk of body, choosing panic's target, and in the same roll of movement he hurled himself headlong for Scott Kellison's knees. The new explosions that rocked the room, the figures that shuttled—it was too much to hear, to quick to see, too deadly for understanding.

He dove for the boots of the Syndicate boss and no kick at his face could stop him short. His lunge slammed into bony flesh, his arms convulsively grappled, and Kellison's weight was tumbled down with him.

Jim heaved and squirmed and clutched a flopping wrist. He flailed a round house blow, was surging back for another when a sudden seizure stayed his arm. A voice shouted at his ear, and he dimly knew Clem Vickery was tugging him.

He sat up. The gunshot echoes still whirred his ears, but already the battle was done. It was plain to see now why Scott Kellison had downed so easy. His one big arm lay limp across Jim's leg, and the bloody sag of his head showed the gouge of the bullet that had finished him.

Old Jason McWhorter was staring at the slump of Will Slocum beside the desk. Clem Vickery and some stranger's face had appeared from the alley doorway.

"I'd trusted Will with my shirt," McWhorter mumbled. "I'd sworn my oath he'd never have the brains or nerve for thievery."

"Outside, Bud!" Vickery ordered. "Don't let a soul in here."

He reached to help Jim up. "We played it mighty close, boy. For a minnit there I was afraid our little scheme would backfire. Four-eyes hopped too quick fer us, and it took a cool head, Cardinal, to switch men like you done. Kellison must've heard us pussy-footin' behind. He was half-turned to cover the door, and if you hadn't tackled 'im as you done I doubt I'd managed to shade his bullet."

"Luck," Jim gasped; but somewhere back in his dizzy head was one little brain that recognized the truth. This world was luck, the good with the bad, and the best that any man could do was cinch his saddle as square as he could and ride it.

CHAPTER XV

TIME TO RIDE, MISTER

THE CEREMONIES held next day were Fourth of July without the firecrackers. Horses hauled from miles around, and Oxbow Town crowded Wagon Street to hear a hundred versions of the big exciting news and to take a look at the corpses. The main event took place at the Stockmen's Bank where Jim was presented a thousand dollars in gold by Jason McWhorter.

Everybody of any account was jammed into the premises, and the overflow eddied the street and sidewalks. There was such a push of talk and opinion in the front space of the bank that Jim Cardinal and Shorty found themselves milled into a corner. The Rafter foreman had discovered Jim after quite a search, and now he gave him another friendly bear-hug.

"You doggone son of a gun, you! You slick little scoun'rel, I swear I never thought you had it in you!"

"I didn't, Shorty. The way it worked out is mainly Vickery's credit. He schemed how to pin it on 'em."

"But the way I heard it—"

Jim grinned. He was rested and washed and shaved, dressed neatly new from hat to bootheels, and the rash of powder-burn on his cheek was his one mark out of the ordinary. With his hatbrim slanted on his brow he'd gone the past hour without special recognition.

"You'll likely hear a lot of stuff," he said, "but at least I'd like the Rafter bunch to know the truth. I come to town last night with no good notion what to do. I played the right hunch, though, and put my trust in the marshal. He worked out—"

"Why the whole street knows, Jim, that he didn't step in until it was practic'ly over."

"Mebbe that's how he wants it told," said Jim. "You be sure and tell the boys that he's quite some diff'rent from the gent we figgered, Shorty. It was his smartness that sent me to the bank with a half-cocked story to put the screw on Will Slocum. Meanwhile he got word to Kel-

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lison, and him and his new deputy stood watch in the alley.

"They claim Scotty listened outside until he heard enough to believe I still had the story wrong. Then he come bustin' in, all hot to cinch it on Vickery, and that's about the story."

"But damn it all," Shorty growled, "I'd like the Rafter to get a little credit. Don't tell me it was Vickery who brush-shot with Gil Rovard up and down the Kettledrums. It was you brought back the proof."

"Well, yeah," said Jim. "The marshal already had his good suspicions though. It's his opinion that Rovard was let in on the robbery deal as kind of insurance. Kellison and Slocum was cagey birds, and it wouldn't cost much of a price to buy Rovard's protection."

"Whadda you mean? What protection?"

"To have a man on the inside of the law. To have a guarantee that Vickery wouldn't come nosin' the wrong alley that night they planned the robbery. That breed was a kill-lover, Shorty. He come in handy afterwards, too, to spy the Elk Hotel and make sure my drunk was as blind as it looked. I'd been settled quick if I'd come to and even mentioned an inklin'."

"It sure beats me," Shorty shook his head. "Ever'body blamed it on the Burkharts."

"That's how they planned it," said Jim. "Vickery was halfway wise from the start, though. He suspicioned the cigarette butts they put around to make it look like more men on the job.

"Will Slocum, of course, was the kingpin, and it was apple pie for him to rig the job while McWhorter was lamed at home. Will could take his leisure to ready the safe and bore out the rear lock. He later dropped the sawdust outside, but he was over-careful. There should been dust inside and out, accordin' to Vickery.

"Will naturally stole the cash in advance, but he had to put it back again when I waltzed in and stopped the dynamite blast that would covered their shenannigan."

"And Scott Kellison on guard patrol in the alley!" Shorty muttered. "No wonder he was first on hand to muddle any hunt. He sure pulled the wool, didn't he? I can see how a man like Scotty might take a get-rich short-cut, but where'd a critter like Slocum find the guts enough? How come them both to turn skunk, Jim?"

Jim shrugged. "Ambition throwed 'em, Vickery says. Claims he got some wind of a Montana cattle deal where thirty thousand might tripled itself. He still can't prove—"

The bellow of Jason McWhorter's voice cut him off. The banker came hopping on a crutch, demanding hush and order. "Where is he?" he shouted. "Clear half these loafers out of here and somebody find Jim Cardinal!"

"Yee-ow!" Shorty yelled. "One side for the Rafter!"

WITH faces ringed around and everybody shushing, old McWhorter said a word or so. He pushed a clinking bag at Jim, but to Jim the look on that sternly bearded face, the sincerity in the banker's voice, was more satisfaction than the reward-money.

"Well, boy, speak up," he ended. "You got any word for your fellow citizens?"

"Not much," said Jim. "Thanks is all, I guess. There is one thing, before I forget: here's this yellowback roll Will Slocum advanced me. You said I was to keep the change, but I—I rather wouldn't."

The banker accepted the crumpled bills, nodding. "I'll bury 'em with it," he said. "I'll put up markers on their graves so other fools can read—" He spread his hands. "But fools don't stop to read. . . . If there's anything else I can do for you, Cardinal—"

"You can keep this other money safe for me," said Jim. "I'll scheme out some use for it. Right now I got to—I'm kind of in a rush." He grinned. "There's a girl I got to hurry to."

They shook his hand and slapped his back. "Where to?" Shorty hollered.

"Star stables," said Jim. "I'm ridin' out—"

And then he heard her calling: Nellie Jarrett.

She was standing on a buckboard platform, down the street a piece, and she waved her handkerchief high and smiling. All the Jarretts were waiting there, with old Miles sawing the reins and cussing. "You're saved the travel, son." Shorty grinned and hauled him forward.

Next thing Jim knew his arms were full of Nellie. Full of her softness and her silken ruffles. She hugged him and she kissed him there for everyone to see.

"Oh, Jim, Jim—we're so proud of you, Jim! I knew it was in you. I told them you just needed the push. . . Climb up, Jim. We're holding a party out at the place; just the friends you know. Honest, Jim, when I stop to think that all your danger was my fault, and how much you went through for me—"

Jim somehow had to stop the fuss. "Look, Nellie," he said hastily, "I can't make it right now. I got so many other things—"

"Why, Jim!" She made the pretty pouting face that his nights used to dream of, and Lord alone knew why that affected him so. Lord knew the last thing in him was any kind of laughter.

Yet he stood and laughed. He laughed with his mouth and his eyes and all of him. The crazy sound hushed the others, turned their friendly looks to stares. Nellie's hand went to her throat as she backed a step away.

"Jim," she pleaded.

"He's drunk," Miles Jarrett said. "Stand clear of him, Nellie!"

SHORTY had him by the arm, and Jim did manage a stagger and reel as he let himself be pulled away. Beyond the walk was a space between buildings, and Shorty's grip bit into his arm as they hurried it. Cross the alley, hop a fence, and yonder was the stable yard.

"Damn you, Jim," Shorty said softly. "That wasn't like you, boy. It was the one mean thing, sober or drunk, I ever seen from you."

"I couldn't help it, Shorty."

"Oxbow knows, the whole range knows, how it was with you and Nellie. Just because she turned you down—" He mumbled an oath. "It was cheap, a tinhorn way to pay her. Just because you done a clever trick, because you got a little money and a lot of bray-mouth praise—"

"Hold it, Shorty!" Jim pleaded. "You know me better'n that. I wouldn't hurt her. I didn't mean—it wasn't her I laughed at. It was me. It was the notions I had. It was the tomfool ideas I rode away with."

"Go on," Shorty said.

Jim planted elbows on his knees, weighted the butts of his hands with his eyebrows. "It was how I felt that night in the Owl—remember?—when I come to quit my job. I envied Will Slocum and Scotty, I recall, for the same push and savvy that turned 'em crooks and killed 'em. I seen them as white and Clem Vickery black; that's how upside-down I was."

"Who wasn't?" said Shorty. "There's no way of judgin' meat by the hide that I heard tell of."

"But suppose it's your own meat and hide?" said Jim. "That's what I'm gettin' at, Shorty. I swore, when I headed into the Kettledrums, that I'd prance back to Nellie the hellfired hero I am or else they'd tote me."

He laughed again. Shorty looked down at him, and now the foreman's features were eased of their frown.

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"But I seen some funny things in yonder," said Jim. "All my trip back—well, I dunno; they kept diggin' into me. One fat gent, he had more *dinero* than Jason McWhorter will ever count. But money was all he had. He sat and nursed it—prayed to it for all I know—and the main idea he lived for was to plant it safe and watch it flower out more money.

"Another fellow there was a stronger horse than you, Shorty; made the size and shape that any man would want to be. He was born and raised to have the best. A bigger kaboodle than we could dream of was dropped into his hat. He had a woman with him, and pretty as Nellie Jarrett may be—"

He shook his head. "Him nor his woman, they couldn't be satisfied, pardner. They reached for more, and when they got it they found it didn't amount to much. I guess that's why I laughed, Shorty. I don't know what started me thinkin' so, or if you'll get what I mean—"

HE LOWERED his hands from his eyes, and Shorty put out spread fingers to cover one fist. "Hell," said Shorty, "we all get spells. I hardly know what to think myself more'n half the time. But what you gonna do, boy? What's the move from here?"

"Well," said Jim, "there's some things to see to. I'd like to know if a sick man lived or died. I got a few borrowings to fetch back to the Kettledrums. Besides, there was another girl up there—"

"I see," Shorty said.

"She's just a little thing, Shorty. Nebraska, that's her name. You might not count her points so much, but there's nothin' else quite like her that I ever hope to see. When she turns her eyes straight up to you, and her kind of scairdy smile—"

"I had a girl once," Shorty said.

"It didn't matter none to her," said Jim, "where I come from or what I had or how much I aimed to be. She somehow cottoned to my ways—squeeze-box tunes or whettin' a knife or whatever comes from day to day. There was a way about her that I could understand, and she seemed to feel the same with me. She—why, she cried when I went away."

"You'll fetch her back, I reckon," Shorty said. "With this stake you got, and all the chances open for you here. . ."

"Mebbe," said Jim. "I ain't studied much beyond the fact we ought to make a easy-pullin' team. As long as we both got somebody special to be with and get on with we should be able to share and be satisfied."

"Shut up, doggone you," Shorty grumbled. "If you could lissen to how you talk and see that look you got—I swear, Jim, you'd be half ashamed."

"The thing about her," Jim rushed on, "is that she's the answer to all the doubts I had. With her, Shorty, a man could take pride in his own style of handiness. He could hunt his ambitions in the toes of his own boots, see what I mean?"

Shorty yanked him to his feet. "Then what in thunder's holdin' you? Grab your tack and kick your horse and skeedaddle back to her. Nebraska, huh? Why if she's just part the things you tell, and if the Kettledrums had another like her, I'd quit the Rafter quicker'n scat and ride your lucky coattails."

Jim gripped his hand and grinned. "Yessir, I sure will hurry. Be sure and tell the boys so long and how it is with me. I'd stop and buy a drink except I got no time to spare.

"There's a preacher may be still stalled somewheres along the trail and I want to dab a rope on him. He's the one lack that stands between me and Gamble's store and the weddin'."

THE END

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Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint

YOU MAY have noticed, the last few weeks, that ARGOSY is coming out of its ivory tower of all-fiction and taking a serious look at the world about it. And you may have wondered why.

On September 6, for example, we gave you "The Miracle of the H.M.S. *Malaya*"—a vivid personal account of a tremendously important engagement in the Mediterranean. This week, in "We Bomb Tokyo", we present a serious consideration of America's strength relative to that of Japan—a matter of utmost concern to all of us just now. And next week—

But we'll get to that later.

Now why this departure? Well, the feeling has been growing on us, these last few months, that it has become impossible to disregard the relentless currents of history that are tugging so strongly at America today. The headlines have caught us and held us; the radio is sounding new alarums at all hours.

Writers, of course, can ignore the pressure of contemporary events no more than the rest of us; and much of ARGOSY's fiction has reflected—in one way or another—the thought and concern of our time with the international struggles that press, increasingly hard, on our Nation.

But fact—as Robert Carse said in Argonotes last week—certainly goes to help fiction; and from our readers' letters, coming to us over the years, we know something of the interest in fact which governs the enjoyment of fiction itself. Let a writer get a detail wrong, and we hear about it!

So:

BECAUSE of this conviction that our readers are alert to all that is going on about them, and because ARGOSY is the kind of a magazine it is—devoted to variety in good fiction of adventure, of far lands and near problems, of action that made history and is making history—because of these considerations, we have felt impelled to give the story *behind* some of our biggest stories.

We think ARGOSY readers want to know, and have a right to know, the significance of present events, the implicit possibilities for the future.

This does not in any sense mean that ARGOSY is abandoning its policy of presenting, from issue to issue, the best choice of fiction to be found in contemporary periodicals. On the contrary: there will always be a wealth of good stories in ARGOSY. The fiction writers you like best will continue to be here, doing business at the old stand. The other is added—that is all.

And next week, in addition to stories by Joel Townsley Rogers, Louis C. Goldsmith, John Russell, Luke Short, and others, we are bringing you a preview of the bombing of New York. Not to curdle the blood, or to frighten readers off their feet; but to make possible a clear, sober realization of what we may be up against, how to provide for it.

It is an honest story, thoughtful and well informed: and it answers questions that many Americans are anxiously asking. We hope you like it.

ARTISTS have always had a lot to do with making the character of ARGOSY, and we go to a great deal of pains in choosing their work. For that reason we are always interested in what readers think of the pictures.

During the last year we've introduced the work of two new men. Both of them are good, but their techniques differ widely; hence it is natural that each should have his special admirers. Here is a preference report from

RAY RYKOWSKI

In your July 26 issue you sort of praised Stanley Maxwell for being one of your best artists. I don't know very much about art, but I think his illustrations are not so good. . . . I think and I know your best artist is the one that draws "Northward Rails." I can't get his name, so you tell me what it is. . . .

(It's Carl T. Pfeufer—Ed.)

. . . I don't like your very short stories, because they are too short. I think you shouldn't have stories about two or three pages long. They should be about six pages or more. I think you shouldn't print stories less than six pages.

I think there should be about two pictures to each story in an issue and not one.

I hope this man *(Pfeufer)* keeps drawing as he does.

Newark, N. J.

WELL, as far as that goes, we think Pfeufer is doing better all the time. There'll be a chance to see some of his best work to date in issues we're scheduling now.

And about having more pictures to a story—just watch us! Within a few weeks—beginning now—the number of pictures will be doubled; and they'll be better, too!

But about the length of stories, we'll have to go back to what we said a week or two ago, when we were talking about serials. It takes all kinds of tastes to make up such a large group of readers as ARGOSY serves. Some like 'em short, some like 'em long.

We like to think that there's plenty of reading here for the pleasant hour or two after dinner, or for those few idle minutes between trains, or at lunch.

As a rule, though, Mr. Rykowski will find that most of the stories run to more than six pages.

IS THE PANAMA CANAL SAFE FROM FASCISM?

There's a knife hovering over America's lifeline, threatening our very existence. Hitler on one side, Japan on the other —*can we defend the canal?*

See ARGOSY for Nov. 15

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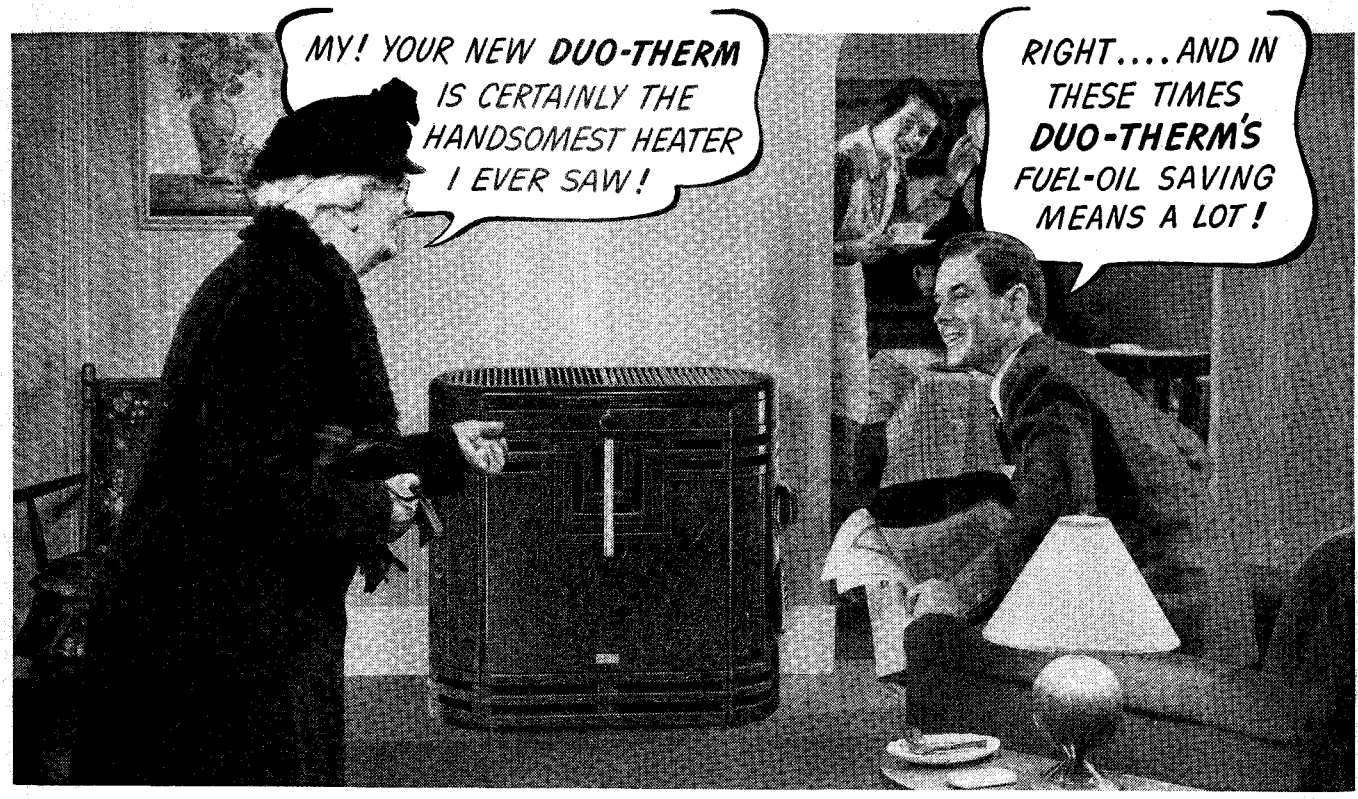
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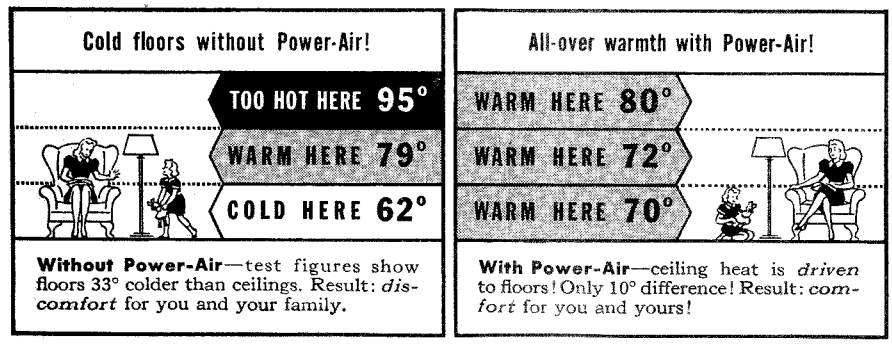
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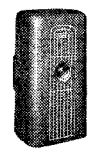

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